

## Covenant Sunday 2021 – Oxford circuit online service: sermon

John Wesley said many things, one of which I like and is particularly appropriate for preachers at the beginning of a New Year is this “Once in seven years I burn all my sermons; for it is a shame if I cannot write better sermons now than I did seven years ago.”

So, in a spirit of brotherhood with dear John, I had a look this week at sermons preached back in 2013. I have to say reading through them again they are indeed a pretty poor set of inadequate words trying to express something of God’s love for the world. To be honest almost every sermon I preach nowadays is recent. Most are written late in the week before, some on Saturday night or even early Sunday morning. Others simply do not make it to the typed page and are so fresh as to be preached on the moment!

Today we remember God’s covenant with the people – renewed in Jesus Christ. The first Covenant service was held on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1755 in a place I know well from my time in Tower Hamlets. A building known as the ‘French’ church on Fournier Street in Spitalfields just off Brick Lane. The church is still there and having been a Protestant Huguenot chapel, then a synagogue, then a Methodist Church it is now a Mosque. Making it one of the few places in the world where over the 265 years of its life generations of Christians, Jews and Moslems have worshipped God. At that Covenant service John Wesley strongly urged Methodists to renew their covenant with God. It is a practice that has been passed on to us in these past 250 years and has been taken up by many other forms of Christianity since the early Wesleyans made it popular.

There are very few people of faith or none who can remain unmoved by the words of the traditional covenant prayer.

As I pray the words, along with others, I recognise;

My need of God.

That I and “all people have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3.23).

That God may intervene in our lives in surprising and challenging ways.

That I am likely to journey with people that God chooses for me rather than those I choose for myself.

That I may suffer or not.

That I may work or not.

That I may be fulfilled or not.

That I may have much or may have nothing.

Each time we renew our personal covenant with God we must ask ourselves “How is this to be part of my life from this day forward?”

We have done Christmas and New Year, and I trust you all had a happy Christmas and will live in a peaceful New Year. Jesus is born Alleluia! Jesus is born in the poorest of conditions, to an unmarried mother, into a world that, through Herod, already wants him dead. So, Jesus is born a poor illegitimate with his death warrant already signed. Not a very good start for the Messiah!

The covenant we are about to make today asks of us “What does this Jesus mean to you”? We begin with ourselves. As I was growing up my life changed when a local preacher told us in one sermon that Jesus was born ‘out of wedlock. At 12 having spent a few of the recent months living with the taunts from some ‘nasty boys’ at school who had found out that I was adopted which, in my case, meant that although I had a mum and dad, they weren’t my ‘real’ parents. When I was born my birth-mother wasn’t married and I had no dad, at least not one that appeared on my birth certificate. Those taunts were just beginning leave scars. Suddenly here was a local preacher a person of standing in our church, a person who spoke with authority telling me that Jesus – Jesus of all people – was a bastard like me!

Now there will be some of you hear who are appalled that I could say 'bastard' in a sermon. Perhaps you would prefer illegitimate or born out of wedlock? Or that I don't mention it at all? More so perhaps than the fact that, whilst I have been preaching this sermon around 20,000 people have died from lack of food, water, basic medical care or shelter? If I and others can bear being called it, then I hope you can bear hearing it on our behalf.

When I discovered that not only had Jesus died for me, but he had been born for me too I was elated and my path to serve him was set. I obviously didn't know at 12 that I was going to be a Methodist minister, indeed I spent much of the years before becoming so doing all I could to avoid it! But in a way I do not understand and cannot explain, God put his hand on me and said, "it's OK to be who you are and there is a place for you in my church".

The point I want to make to you today is that the church, our church, first and foremost has to be a place where all are welcome. Despite the very strange start to my time here as a Minister because of the COVID-19, I have already been privileged to hear some of the stories of many people in our churches and beyond. I can tell you now that there is not a single one of us who is 'acceptable', but for God's good grace in Christ. There are people in our churches who have broken laws, who have children 'out of wedlock' (with more than one partner in some cases), who have had or still have problems with alcohol and other drugs, who have stolen, who have lied, who have cheated on loved ones, who are divorced and remain unmarried, who are divorced and have new marriages, who have family in prison, who have mental health problems, who have children who are gay or are gay themselves.

Like me, many people hide their true selves because it is less painful, but only just, than being you and being shunned, oppressed or even persecuted for it. The covenant is about God accepting us as we are in return for us accepting God in our lives and allowing God to set us on the journey God has for us. Alongside those he has in mind for us and the places, people, work, rest or play God has in store for us.

The covenant is a sign of God's impartiality and an affirmation of God's loving design of diversity. All are welcome to make this covenant for it is a covenant of the Kingdom not of the church. In 2004 on a tour of the 10 countries joining the EU that May (and how sad our leaving makes me feel), I visited Auschwitz. Such a place is one of the most extreme and disturbing examples of death. Such places are not about God's Kingdom (whatever many people the church of the day said – those in Germany that disagreed such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer were imprisoned and shot), but about the kingdoms of human making – in that case 'King' Adolf Hitler and his Arian kingdom. The covenant of God's Kingdom has to be remade because human beings will insist on trying to make God's Kingdom, in the church, one that encourages and supports people's prejudices. In the late 1950's onwards when people came from the Caribbean to the UK many were made very unwelcome in the churches here in Britain. "This is not the church for you – there is one down the road for blacks" to quote one such example. I have been humbled to hear the testimony of those who were there and experienced it for themselves. Our churches often showed terrible prejudice and racism to those who had come from churches overseas. No-one has yet told me that because I'm a bastard I can't be a Christian or in a church or hold an ordained office in the church – but who knows, it may not be long! It may come round again that people like us will be unacceptable to the church. Our experiences of being outcast must unite us with Christ and help us in our covenant to accept others who come to our church – especially those God sends along to us that challenge our own prejudices. You can be sure that whatever your particular prejudices are God will challenge them sooner or later!

Jesus makes all welcome. In doing so he will sometimes ask us to associate with people we find difficult. Jesus invites all to his table, yes even us. Jesus is the bearer of our sins and he is the maker and fulfilment of the covenant we make. AMEN