

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Luke 13:31-35 COVENANT

17th March 2019, CCO & StJN.

Father, we thank you for your faithfulness to us. Help us to hear and to live by your word to us. Amen.

In our Gospel reading we have the beautiful image of Jesus as the mother hen, longing to gather her chicks under her wings, to keep them safe and warm. It is a tender and poignant expression of just how much Jesus loved his people, and yearned for them to accept the love that he and the Father have for them.

At home, we have been lucky for the last 4 or 5 years to have a pair of mallard ducks coming to our pond to do their courting, nesting in the garden or nearby, and then seeing Mrs Duck emerge with her tiny fluffy ducklings, taking them to the pond to learn how to swim. It's a wonderful sight. After their initial dip of 10 minutes or so, she quacks away to gather them together and somehow manages to spread her wings and her feathers over them so that each and every one of them is sheltered and totally hidden from sight. She has had broods of 14 ducklings – and every one is protected. It is a lovely image of God's overwhelming love for us, his vulnerable little ones. And if these ducklings stop listening to mother's quacks, if they don't follow her as she calls but wander off, then they are in very great danger. And not only them, but potentially those around them too, as we have seen in the tragedy in New Zealand this week.

Few things hurt as much as to go to someone and offer love and have that offer spurned. It is one of life's most bitter tragedies to give one's heart to someone only to have it broken. That is what happened to God's prophets. That is what happened to Jesus in Jerusalem. Yet still he comes to people, but still people reject him.

And the reason why this rejection pains Jesus so is because he understands just how great is God's love for us, he feels the rejection that is felt by God when we turn our back on him and carry on with life as though he isn't there. Jesus gets it. He knows his scriptures and he knows that God is faithful, that he has made his covenant with us, and he will never go back on his word.

And Covenant is what our reading in Genesis is all about. It may strike us as rather a strange scene, all these animals and birds, killed and cut in two and the halves lined up opposite each other. What is that all about?

Well, what do we mean by covenant. We might think of it as a treaty, a legal contract. In Old Testament times, a covenant might be made between nations. It might be:

- between nations on an equal footing, with all sorts of terms and conditions on both sides, as a way of ensuring peace
- between a conquering nation and the conquered nation, when the terms and conditions would favour the victors

If one side broke the covenant, then there would be penalties. In our own time, we have the EU treaty and Brexit negotiations, showing just how difficult it can be to extricate oneself from a legal agreement.

But God's covenant is much more than a legal contract. One of the nearest things we have to this sort of covenant in our own lives is marriage. Some people think of marriage as just a legal contract: you hear folk say, 'we don't need a bit of paper to show our love for each other.' But marriage is so much more than just a legal contract: it is a deep commitment on both sides, where husband and wife bind themselves to each other, emotionally, physically and spiritually, and pledge to share the whole of life with one another. That's why it is so painful when a marriage covenant is broken.

And that is the sort of covenant that God has made with us, his human creation. The Bible is full of this covenant, and one of the main things we notice about it is that it is always God's initiative. He comes to us.

God made his covenant with Noah and through him with all creation. He made his covenant with Abraham and through him with the people of Israel. He had a role for them to play in making known his love to the rest of humankind. Sadly, they failed to understand what their side of the covenant involved. God didn't ask too much: he wanted them to love him and be faithful to him, to follow his ways and not go off worshiping other gods and ignoring his commandments to them.

As we know, they were forever wandering off, like wayward little ducklings, and they suffered the consequences. The prophets kept telling them that they had broken their covenant with God, they kept calling the people back to the one true God, back to that special relationship that they were intended to enjoy. Listen to these words from the prophet Hosea: he describes the people of Israel as being like an unfaithful wife who wanders off to have adulterous affairs. But despite her faithlessness, God promises: "I will bring my people back to me.

I will love them with all my heart;
no longer am I angry with them.

I will be to the people of Israel
like rain in a dry land.

They will blossom like flowers . . .

They will be alive with new growth,
and beautiful like olive trees. . .

Once again they will live under my protection.

They will grow crops of grain
and be fruitful like a vineyard.

They will be as famous as the wine of Lebanon.

The people of Israel will have nothing more to do with idols;

I will answer their prayers and take care of them.

Like an evergreen tree I will shelter them;

I am the source of all their blessings. . . .

I will say 'You are my people' and they will answer, 'You are our God.'"

But the people took no notice; still they turned away, over and over again throughout the centuries. That is why Jesus laments: 'Jerusalem! Jerusalem!', he cries. 'You kill the prophets, you stone the messengers God has sent you!'

Jesus knows that God is eternally faithful to his creation, to us as human beings. He knows that God is totally committed to us in love. And he understands that this great love is not only for the people of Israel. During his ministry we see that understanding develop. And then we have Jesus' last supper and his death on the cross. In our passage from Genesis, we hear of God making his covenant with Abraham. Abraham offers the animals whose blood has been shed, and we're told that God, like a flaming torch, passes between the two halves – the sign, the sealing of the covenant.

We know from the Old Testament how important blood is as the symbol of life. But that isn't only true of the Old Testament. I'm sure you have heard the expression Blood Brothers. Now I know there's a show and a film of this name which refers to people being blood relations, ie from the same family. But the term is much older than that and used to describe men not related by birth who have sworn loyalty to each other. This is usually done by each person making a small cut, usually on a finger, hand or the forearm, and then the two cuts are pressed together and bound.

The idea is that each person's blood now flows in the other participant's veins. Probably not to be recommended in the era of AIDS. Sometimes gang members make this sort of blood pact.

I remember it being done when I was a kid – but I never got that far myself!

The process is meant to give each participant a heightened symbolic sense of attachment with the other participant. They are now committed to each other, joined by their mingled blood, by a shared life.

When Jesus takes the cup at the Last Supper he says ‘This is my blood of the New Covenant’. His blood shed on the cross and offered to us in the wine of communion is the sign of God’s ongoing covenant with his people. Why is it the New Covenant? Because there is no longer any need to kill animals or people to seal the covenant between God and his people. Jesus’ blood, shed for all, and the resurrection that follows, is the sign that God’s covenant has now been sealed with the whole of humanity, once and for all.

God promises us his unfailing love, his total commitment to us. He promises to give us new life, with him, forever. And what is our side of the covenant? We simply have to return his love. We have to come to him, acknowledge when we fail, ask him to restore our right relationship with him and show that we really do want to live as his faithful children. He is always there, ready and waiting for us. Every time we share Christ’s blood in the wine of communion, this is what we are doing: we are recommitting ourselves to him, we are renewing our promise to live in this covenant relationship with him. By taking Christ into ourselves in the bread and the wine, we are mingling our souls and bodies with his soul and body. ‘We are possessors of a double life, having taken our friend’s life and nature into ourselves. Inside us, God rides our bloodstream straight to our heart where the covenant is written: I shall be your God and you shall be my people.’ (Barbara Brown Taylor).

Always the initiative is God’s, and always he is faithful. We fail, we disappoint. But his mercy is everlasting. He will never break his covenant with us. Every time we come and take communion, we receive, and we give. We remind ourselves that this is who we really are, and this is where we really belong, under those spread out wings of the mother hen. Amen.