

Lent 4, 10 March 2024, Year B:

John 3.14-21, Numbers 21.4-9, Psalm 107.1-9

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. (Psalm 19.14)

Over the last three Sundays of our Lenten journey, we have considered three of the covenants, which God established with his people. They were the Noachic, the Abrahamic and the Mosaic covenants. Let us hear the promises attached to each of the covenants again.

Noachic: Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.' (Genesis 9.8-12)

Abrahamic: When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the Lord appeared to Abram, and said to him, 'I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless. And I will make my covenant between me and you, and will make you exceedingly numerous.' (Genesis 17.1-2)

Mosaic: The Lord said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. He was there with the Lord for forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Exodus 34:27-28)

There are others as you may know, such as the Adamic and the Davidic covenant and soon we will recall the new covenant bought with Jesus' blood meaning his

death on the cross. We play down the ubiquity and depth of sin and therefore its depravity and our part in it. And because of this pervasive propensity in us, we are shocked again and again by man's inhumanity to man. This propensity to 'kleinreden' (minimize) means that sin and humanity's wretchedness as the Book of Common Prayer expresses it 'unverblümt' (bluntly) is offensive to us. Even the cross and the language of blood is offensive to us, but they are given, blood and cross that through these symbols we might grasp the cost of our sin. The toll it takes. It is not a little. It is great. Through these symbols we are reminded yes that sin and death have been vanquished. They need no more have dominion over us, but also and importantly that sin cuts deep, deeper than we care to admit or even imagine. Jesus will give his human and divine self for the world that the world might live in and through him unto God the source of all life out of which a reverence for gift of life grows

Recently I have been dismayed first by Kamala Harris promoting forcefully reproductive rights, which let us be honest is a euphemism for abortion and making it the main pledge as a mother for her vice-presidential platform with people cheering even shrieking in the background. Rather than receiving this news with silence... before the mystery of life, the awesomeness of God and the suffering it will cause.

This has been followed up by the President of France ensuring that abortion is now written into the constitution with a staggering majority of members of the French parliament voting in favour. At the other end of the age spectrum there are moves afoot to legalise euthanasia, to make assisted suicide legal, which have gained pace

in recent years taking on disturbing dimensions. Ferdinand von Schirach wrote a play on this for a German audience, where assisted suicide is permitted. The play revolves around the question whether a doctor should be compelled to prescribe the necessary medication against his or her conscience. In Germany the association of doctors came out against this understandably. At the end of the play across Germany, audiences are invited to vote on the question whether or not the doctor should be compelled to prescribe the medication. Vote after vote across Germany audiences voted in favour of compelling doctors to prescribe the medication because they should respect the wishes of the patient against their conscience. All this under the banner of Selbstbestimmung (self-determination).

At the other end of the political spectrum we have those who oppose abortion, while embracing capital punishment without batting an eyelash. A little consistency in these matters on either side would be welcome.

For Christians the greatest gift is the gift of life and in Christ the gift of new life through which we learn reference for all life. We are by our Christian profession for life realising that there may be a few exceptions. Persons in the past who committed suicide, as is well known, would not receive a Christian funeral and were to be buried outside the church graveyard. Today we feel this to be too severe a punishment understanding too little what lay behind the former practice, but we ought to understand, and what I have said above might help?

The greatest sin is to take one's own life. Why? because the life we are gifted is the greatest gift we have been given as described above. For Christians the greatest gift

is the gift of life and in Christ the gift of new life. Let's think this a little further. When someone takes their life, it does not only affect the person, who we accept may have been suffered greatly. It also affects all the people around them causing further misery and anguish, especially when a spouse and children are involved and parents still living. In the UK today it is Mothering Sunday... The irony screams to heaven. People will ask themselves, Could I have done more? Why did I not see the signs? Why did they not confide in me? The spouse might ask, Was my love so wanting? The children will certainly ask given the evidence; Did I cause my parent's unhappiness? They will be reassured that it wasn't their fault, but will the assurance suffice? In many cases it won't.

In England very recently a man, who was a Christian, took his life. No sooner is the news out everyone is showing great understanding, but we no longer have the clarity to call what has happened also a sin. In no way do I want to belittle the anxiety and hopelessness of this person's situation. I too can personally bring great understanding. I can empathise. I am pastorally available because we are to show compassion and understanding and be long-suffering, but the mantra and the cul-de-sac of 'Selbstbestimmung' (self-determination) as the overriding commandment of today is wanting and comes with a sting. Doctors who have a conscience and who are not prepared to subscribe the medication needed may soon be obliged to so by law. To my mind it is only a matter of time. All conscience clauses I have known in my life soon and very soon are overruled by the all-knowing majority. The idea of respecting a person's conscience is always a stepping stone along the way.

One of the few places a majority voted against the motion was in Berlin. This is surprising at first, but as most will know Berlin was a divided city. West Berlin was part of the West enjoying a higher degree of freedom of speech, while East Berlin was part of the Warsaw Pact. People in the East were not allowed to follow their conscience. The all-knowing party was to be their compass. It was their conscience. The party knew best. Having suffered the dictates of the party for many East Germans one of the greatest achievements of their liberation from the yoke of slavery, besides the freedom of movement, was the freedom of conscience.

I have described to some of you how when Russia invaded Ukraine violating national borders, Putin – and it takes only one person to endanger the fragile peace in Europe – Putin called together a most beautiful array of Aeroflot stewardesses all with distinct Slavic features. The stewardesses all sat around an oval table with Putin holding forth as is his wont. The camera present went around the table slowly, we can be sure recording the perfectly done-up faces of the stewardesses. Not one of them dared to blink, smile or show any facial expression, lest they be found out.

Recently Putin gave his annual state of the nation speech failing to do so after invading Ukraine due to his great failure and not achieving any of his objectives... This year all the members of the Politburo sat there poker-faced as they listened. All full of fear like the stewardesses that they might be found out not 100% on board. 'Die Gedanken sind frei!' my mother would say quoting Schiller, but be assured not in Putin's post-Soviet Russia. In the West we detect more and more signs that we too are under the threat of illiberal trends, by those who in the name

of supposed liberal values want to silence voices that question, investigate with vigour or oppose on good grounds many of today's trends. I am reminded of what Jesus says elsewhere in John as I review what I have said, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'
(John 10.10)

We began by reminding ourselves of a good number of the covenants that God established with his people for life down the ages. First with all people, then with Abraham, the father of us all, and then with the people of Israel. And the covenant which Jesus establishes through the cross taking upon himself the great sin of humanity. Last week I said, you may remember that the covenants are also a part of our heritage and a part of who we are as Christians and who we are becoming having been grafted into the life-giving covenantal legacy.

In today's reading from the Book of Exodus we see a freed people wandering through the desert after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt, who are thirsty and hungry and have become impatient. In their distress they speak against God and Moses saying, 'Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? For there is no food and no water, and we detest this miserable food.' God has provided food in the form of manna. God has led them with a cloud by day and fire by night. (Deuteronomy 1.33) God has provided water having instructed Moses to strike the rock out of which water flows abundantly. They have been gifted a Law to live by as a people. Despite all the good things they have received, they have become impatient with the God of their liberation. Their distress grows even greater through their impatience, as they are struck down by poisonous

snakes. Realising they have offended God and Moses by speaking against God the people repent. God's response is to order Moses to make a bronze serpent. By looking at the serpent those who have been bitten by a poisonous serpent are able to live. Look to God is the call.

Indeed a strange story but given to remind us who dwell below that for life and human flourishing we are to look to God, who is the source of life and in whom is our life. The story of the serpent in the wilderness, as the early Christians realised was a precursor of the cross of Calvary on which hung the saviour of the world. Jesus recalls the story of the bronze serpent saying to Nicodemus, 'And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.' And then Jesus continues with words that have been etched on the hearts and minds of Christians down the centuries. 'For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.' John 3.15.

We may all become impatient with life, which is often more an impatience with ourselves, but also often because we cannot love ourselves, but we can and we should know ourselves loved by God. Each and every one of us is one of God's precious ones. Each one of his like a precious stone to Him. In John's gospel we read elsewhere that God desireth not the death of a sinner, but that he or she may live. (BCP, Confession) Repentance and the seeking of forgiveness is to be our way.

You and I are to look to Jesus, who at the beginning of creation brings all things into being and will bring all things to completion at the end of creation, when all shall

be taken up and transformed. In the meantime may we continue to ‘pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life’. The emphasis here being on life, on common life. Or as the Darby Bible of 1889 translates, ‘So then let us pursue the things which tend to peace, and things whereby one [we] shall build up another.’ (Romans 14.19).