

LAIRG CHURCH OF SCOTLAND & ROGART (ST CALLANS) CHURCH OF SCOTLAND  
SCO20871 and SCO10035

Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> January

As I was thinking about our worship for this Sunday I was talking with a friend of mine down in England who is a member of the Methodist Church and she was telling me about a Methodist tradition, I think originally instituted by John Wesley, and that is to mark either the first Sunday of a new year or one very near the beginning of the year as Covenant Sunday. So today I would like us to follow this tradition and focus during our service on the concept of covenant and what it might mean. It's perhaps an old fashioned word but as I have been thinking about it this week I have been reminded of it's biblical usage and what it might mean for us today.

**Call to worship**

Jeremiah 31:33-34

<sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

**Hymn : Will your anchor hold**

1 Will your anchor hold in the storms of life,  
when the clouds unfold their wings of strife?  
When the strong tides lift, and the cables  
strain,  
will your anchor drift, or firm remain?

Refrain:

We have an anchor that keeps the soul  
steadfast and sure while the billows roll;  
fastened to the Rock which cannot move,  
grounded firm and deep in the Saviour's love!

2 Will your anchor hold in the straits of fear,  
when the breakers roar and the reef is near?  
While the surges rage, and the wild winds  
blow,  
shall the angry waves then your bark o'erflow?  
[Refrain]

3 Will your anchor hold in the floods of  
death,  
when the waters cold chill your latest  
breath?  
On the rising tide you can never fail,  
while your anchor holds within the veil.  
[Refrain]

4 Will your eyes behold through the morning  
light  
the city of gold and the harbour bright?  
Will you anchor safe by the heavenly shore,  
when life's storms are past for evermore?  
[Refrain]

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**Opening Prayers**

Loving God, bring us together to worship and sing, to pray and praise, to learn and reflect.  
Loving God, we come today because being part of this worshipping community gives rhythm to our week, especially in these days when one day seems to be so like every other.  
As we think today of the covenants that you have made with your people over the centuries we ask that you will open our hearts and minds to what this means for us today. We acknowledge your never failing, never ending commitment to us, even during those times when we let you down or turn our backs on you. Help us today to reconsider our covenant, our promises with you. Challenge us today to recommit ourselves to you, and to take up a way of life that will bring us daily closer to you, and will help us bring about a better world.  
So therefore, as your people who try to be faithful disciples of Jesus we offer our prayers and praise to you. We come, so come to us Lord Jesus.  
Amen.

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**Genesis 9 : 8 - 11**

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him: <sup>9</sup> “I now establish my covenant with you and with your descendants after you <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that was with you—the birds, the livestock and all the wild animals, all those that came out of the ark with you—every living creature on earth. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you: Never again will all life be destroyed by the waters of a flood; never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth.

**Romans 8:35, 37-39**

<sup>35</sup> Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

<sup>37</sup> No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. <sup>38</sup> For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, <sup>39</sup> nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

**Mark 14: 22-25 The Institution of the Lord's Supper**

22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, “Take; this is my body.” 23 Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. 24 He said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 25 Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.”

**Reflections on the readings**

‘Gracious God, as we come to your word we pray: open up your word to our hearts and our hearts to your word, so that you may change us. Amen.

As we consider the theme of covenants I'd like to reflect on three things.

First, we remind ourselves of our covenant with God and His with us.

Second, we encourage ourselves by considering the Providence of God.

Third, we submit ourselves to the service of God.

Let's look at those in more detail. We remind ourselves, firstly, of our covenant with God.

We must not lose sight of the wonderful privilege it is to be in relationship to God. A relationship not primarily based on our faithfulness, our goodness or understanding, but rather on God's faithfulness, goodness and grace. So whatever comes our way, whatever tragedy or trauma, failing or sin, complexity or conflict, one thing is sure: we belong to God, and God to us. The rainbow shown to Noah and his family was and is a visible sign for God's promise and goodness to His people through the ages. The new covenant to which Jeremiah looked, that we read at the start of our service is a covenant written on the heart. And there's nothing that can change it. Unchangeable, faithful, permanent are all words that describe the covenant relationship between God and his people.

Having reminded ourselves of our covenant with God, and God with us, we encourage ourselves by the Providence of God.

The covenant service celebrates our trust that God is in control and has a plan and a purpose for us, and for the world. It celebrates also our belief that God's plan is for our deepest and most joyful good. Therefore, whatever God asks of us, we will do. However, let's be honest, when we look around at the world, and indeed at the church, it's sometimes difficult to believe that God is in control. When we've been in the grip of a global pandemic for the better part of a year. When unarmed black people are killed in the street, or at home in their beds. When innocent civilians are gunned down by extremists in Vienna or run down on the streets of our cities and hundreds are killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria. Is God in control, really? When increasing numbers in Britain rely on foodbanks each week to survive. When, in this country alone, tens of thousands

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have died from Covid, and millions are in local lockdown as we speak. The Covenant Service seeks to remind us that despite appearances to the contrary, God is, indeed, in control.

We worship Christ crucified, the Christ who appeared to be overcome, when he was unjustly executed. But who rose from the dead, who ascended to heaven, and whose return we continue to await. It is in his providence that we dare to hope. And because of our hope in Christ Jesus, in a world that is in so many ways screwed up and messed up, we nonetheless see signs of beauty, holiness and hope.

We're humbled by those who put themselves in harm's way in the fight against the pandemic. We're encouraged by the neighbourliness and community spirit that lockdown has unlocked. We're amazed by the international cooperation that enabled the accelerated development of a vaccine in ten months, that would otherwise have taken ten years. We're surprised by our capacity to adapt to unanticipated and unprecedented change.

Despite the ugliness of much that is going on in the world, we also see the providence of God, and the purposes of God, at work. And this encourages us. That God might just know what He's doing in the world. And, therefore, might just know what he's up to in our lives.

Today, we remind ourselves of our Covenant with God. We encourage ourselves by the Providence of God. And, finally, we submit ourselves to the service of God.

Christ has many services to be done. Some are easy, others are difficult. Some bring honour, some bring reproach. Some are suited to our natural inclinations and material interests. Others are contrary to both. In some, we may please God and please ourselves. In others, we cannot please God except by denying ourselves. Yet, the power to do all these things, is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us. So begins our covenant.

This statement is inspiring and intimidating in equal measure. Because, I don't know about you but, I want to be fair, I want to please Christ, but I also want to please myself too. I'm happy to serve Christ in areas of my natural inclinations. But less happy, when it is contrary to those or my material interests. To serve Christ when it brings honour is easy, but we are less keen when it brings reproach. A Covenant Service today is a re-invitation to submit ourselves to the service of God, afresh.

And this is not only relevant to 'church jobs'. You know, whether you'll serve as treasurer, or steward, whether you'll be a deacon or elder, pastoral visitor, or consider working with young people. This is equally relevant to your career choices, or how you spend retirement. Are you only interested in the roles which bring status, honour, and reward? Or are you equally open to the roles that are less obviously rewarding, but might just be where God needs you to make a difference?

Today, we remind ourselves of our Covenant with God. We encourage ourselves by the Providence of God. And we resubmit ourselves to the service of God. Christ indeed has many services to be done, both inside and outside the church. To which ones will we submit ourselves, this Sunday?

**A Personal Covenant Prayer**

I am no longer my own but yours.

Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I may endure;

when there is work for me and when there is none;

when I am troubled and when I am at peace.

Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded;

when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking;

when I have all things, and when I have nothing I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God,

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Father, Son and Holy Spirit,  
you are mine and I am yours.  
May it be so for ever.

Let this covenant now made on earth be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.

**Prayers of intercession**

Sit in a comfortable position with feet on the floor and take two or three deep breaths. Relax each part of your body. Be aware of any sounds around you and focus on the sound of your breathing. Be still and know that God is with you.

*Keep a moment of silence*

Listen for the good news that God wants you to hear today.

Is it forgiveness for past wrongs? Hope for the future? Healing for a loved one? Joy in knowing that God is your rock and that salvation comes to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Listen, the kingdom of God is near.

*Keep a moment of silence*

Listen for good news that God offers those who are in pain: those who hunger and thirst, those who suffer grief and loss, those who are homeless, injured or living in war zones. Thank God for those who reach out with love and care, offering hope and hospitality, healing and reconciliation. Listen, the kingdom of God is near.

*Keep a moment of silence*

Listen for Christ's call on your life today. Hear his invitation to follow, to get involved, to trust the one who said 'I am the way, the truth and the life. Follow me.'

The kingdom of God is near.

Amen.

**Hymn: O Jesus I have promised**

1 O Jesus, I have promised  
To serve thee to the end;  
Be thou forever near me,  
My Master and my friend;  
I shall not fear the battle  
If thou art by my side,  
Nor wander from the pathway  
If thou wilt be my guide.

2 O let me feel thee near me!  
The world is ever near:  
I see the sights that dazzle,  
The tempting sounds I hear.  
My foes are ever near me,  
Around me and within;  
But, Jesus, draw thou nearer,  
And shield my soul from sin.

3 O let me hear thee speaking  
In accents clear and still,  
Above the storms of passion,  
The murmurs of self-will.  
O speak to reassure me,  
To hasten or control;  
O speak, and make me listen,  
Thou guardian of my soul.

4 O Jesus, thou hast promised  
To all who follow thee  
That where thou art in glory  
There shall thy servant be.  
And, Jesus, I have promised  
To serve thee to the end;  
O give me grace to follow,  
My Master and my friend.

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**Blessing**

May we go with the courage of Christ in our hearts.

May we go with the fierce energy of the Spirit in our bodies.

May we go with the God of love streaming through us and out into the world.

Go in peace, and serve the Lord.

Amen