

April 19th 2020
Renewed Commitment
2 Kings 23:1-3/ 1Peter:1-9,13-16,21-23

Last Sunday we celebrated Easter, not in our usual exuberant way but as we could given our current restraints. I hope that it was nonetheless a joyful and blessed celebration for you.

In the Church of England we often renew our baptismal vows on Easter Sunday and all this week the Methodist Covenant Prayer has been on my mind. Methodists tend to renew their covenant with God in the New Year rather than at Easter, but I have often found the Covenant Prayer that they use to be helpful in my own Christian life and along with our readings, especially from 1 Peter, I felt it was right to use it as the basis of my talk today. You may already be familiar with it, but let me read it to you:

I am no longer my own, but yours.

Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will;

Put me to doing, put me to suffering;

Let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you,

Exalted for you, or brought low for you;

Let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing:

I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it.

And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen

I think that is an amazing prayer to pray. And the thing that always strikes me about it is the absolute humility of it. To be prepared to be used in any way God sees fit, but also to be prepared to be laid aside, not used at all. That kind of goes against the grain in all of us doesn't it? One of the things that I have observed over the many years that I have been a Christian, is how

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incredibly hard it can be for someone to lay down a ministry. Whether that is as a Church leader, the leader of a Christian project, laying down a whole project that has had its time and needs to end, my word that can be the hardest of all, or whether it is as a Sunday School teacher or even as the person who organises the teas and coffees. If we have a thing that is our thing, even if in itself it is quite a humble thing, it is something that gives us purpose and makes us feel good. It might well be what God once called us to do, to give it up, to be laid aside – what would we be then?

Well funnily enough it is a position that in a strange way many of us find ourselves in now. Maybe not so much for those who are still able to go to work or to work from home, but for lots of people it feels as if we have been laid aside.

In Jesus we see total humility, complete submission to the Father's will. He literally became nothing for us, His life poured out. He faced total rejection, utter humiliation and horrific suffering. Did it come easily? No, remember how He wrestled in prayer in Gethsemane. If even Jesus struggled with the humility and total submission that was required, then we should hardly be surprised that it doesn't come easily to us, although most of us will never have to face obedience to be killed for our faith. For most of us the thing we will probably struggle with most is our pride. And that is why I think that the Covenant Prayer is so hard to pray and to truly mean, and why it is good to come back to it again and again and remind ourselves just who we are and what we are called to. To belong, wholly and completely to God, to have our entire being in Him and find our purpose, our very reason for existing just to be in Him. But then we have to live the lives that we have been given in the

April 19th 2020
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places where we are with the people who surround us and that is where 1 Peter, along with many other scriptures of course, comes in so helpful. We find ourselves at various times facing trials in life, for many people this time of isolation is an extreme trial and trials will test our faith in any number of ways. We may sometimes stumble along the way, but when we come through any trial in life, however battered and bruised we may be, the faith that we come through it with has been tested by fire and to God it is more precious than gold.

We are called to Holy Living. Each one of us, when we decide to live for Christ is set apart. We are not taken out of this life, but we are called to live differently. We are called to prepare our minds for action and to discipline ourselves. This just might be a wonderful time of preparation for us. That is not to play down in anyway just how terrible the situation is or the awful suffering that is going on at this time around the world. But we may have an opportunity now to be taking time to prepare ourselves and to discipline ourselves for whatever the next thing is that God calls us to. We are told that He has prepared good works for us to do, and I know that many of us are praying that things will be different after this has passed, that we will be different, that the Church will look different that there will be new opportunities and challenges and we need to be ready. Ready for whatever will happen next, ready even if nothing happens next. Peter tells us to set our hopes on the grace that Jesus will bring us. We need to be holy as He is Holy. We need to be obedient as He was obedient. Mutual love is imperative – the last thing that Jesus did before He ate with the disciples for the last time before His arrest was to wash their feet. Again, He showed us what true

April 19th 2020
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humility looks like, what it really means to love each other and regard each other more highly than ourselves. We find this so difficult don't we? How hard is it not to judge each other, not to measure ourselves against each other. Not to see the faults in others but simply to regard them with love and compassion and place them always before ourselves. Serving isn't so hard – you can serve others physically, do things for them and feel quite good about yourself. Having a right attitude in our hearts though – there's the rub. In our own strength these things are not possible, but with God all things are possible, we just need to submit to Him. After all we have been born again through the living enduring Word of God which is Jesus Himself. We are set apart in Him and for Him and it is possible to live our lives in the light of His love. If we are to grow in this love it doesn't help to set ourselves up to fail. We don't need lofty unobtainable goals, we just need to come back day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute even to the throne of Grace and remember who we are, and how much we are loved and when we remember again His overwhelming love for us then it seems such a small thing to love others. He has already given us all that we need.

I am going to pray this prayer of Covenant again, slowly, line by line and I invite you to pray it too, to renew your own Covenant commitment to God. And we will put it up on the websites, you might like to print it out if you are able to and put it up somewhere as a reminder.

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