

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 21 March, 2021

Lord God, help us turn our hearts to you and hear what you will speak, for you speak peace to your people through Christ our Lord, Amen.

Jeremiah 31:31-34, John 12:20-33

A new covenant and a grain of wheat

In scripture, covenant¹ is an agreement which brings about a relationship of commitment between God and God's people. It is quite an extraordinary concept as we say that God is omniscient – the state of knowing everything, omnipotent – having unlimited power, and omnipresent – being everywhere. Why would such an all-powerful God need human partners in the first place? This question leads us to the creation story in Genesis, which we are created according to the image of God. For instance, when a child bears the same image of a parent/parents, the child may also have the same characters that the parents had. Likewise as bearers of God's image, we are considered as partners of God. When this partnership is broken after the Fall, the first step God takes in repairing this partnership is to select a small group of people and make a new partnership with them. It is called a 'covenant.' In total, there are four Old Testament covenants – one with Noah, one with Abraham, one with the Israelites, and one with King David. Even so, these covenants are broken repeatedly by the human sides. As such, God wants to see a new covenant that will not be broken for good.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34, God is about to make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. In the end, this new covenant becomes the basis for naming the second part of the Christian canon as the "New Testament" (or "New Covenant"). Here the contents of the New Covenant are not the focus. It is rather the means by which God will bring it about. Unlike the old covenant which was written on stone tablets that can be broken, the new covenant will be written within the people, on their very hearts. As such, it will allow people to know who YHWH is. In the end, this prophecy has been actualized in the person of Jesus. In the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus eats the old Passover meal and re-creates it into a new covenant meal. When Jesus lifts the Passover cup of wine, he says that the cup is the new covenant in his blood shed for us and for all people for the forgiveness of sins.² This sacramental meal is incorporated into our hearts and bodies and we become one body. Through us, the work of

¹ The Hebrew term **בְּרִית** *bĕrīyth* for "covenant" is from a root with the sense of "cutting", because pacts or covenants were made by passing between cut pieces of flesh of the victim of an animal sacrifice.

² Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24; Luke 22:20

Jesus continues. Here the image of a grain of wheat is in view. Once the seed is into the earth – that is the word of God is in us, it cannot be separated as the seed takes root in the earth and it sprouts. As the seed is growing, the earth is helping it to complete the work.

The new covenant in Jeremiah as well as in John thus has differences from the old covenant. First, the new covenant cannot be broken as it will be kept by God. Second, the new covenant has a unilateral character. God has not set any conditions. Third, under the new covenant, everyone will know God. Fourth, under the new covenant, they may sin, but God will forgive them. This prophecy is finally realized when Jesus establishes the sacramental meal through which a new and perfect partnership with God has been made. Through the new covenant in Jesus Christ, God's initial plan for mankind is made complete. Christ himself is the New Testament covenant - a covenant that cannot fail and cannot be broken. So what does it mean to us today?

In our story time, we heard a story titled 'The Little Red Hen.' The story tells us quite a familiar scene that we may easily see on a daily basis, such as in a family or a work place. In the story, the little Red Hen has friends who wouldn't help her whatever she asks them. From the beginning, the little Red Hen is different from her friends in many ways. When she finds a grain of wheat on the ground, she decides to sow it to grow instead of eating the grain on the spot. Despite her continuing requests for help, no one turns up to help her. Eventually the bread is ready and she asks who will help her eat the bread. Everyone turns up in respond to her request. The little Red Hen, however, decides to eat the bread with her family only. The question was if we don't like the ending, what we want to see in a new ending.

Some of us may have felt catharsis when the selfish friends finally meet with such an ending. From a common sense, nothing is wrong with her decision. They are friends, but it is not a covenantal relationship. But then another question may arise - if we read this story from biblical perspectives, the little Red Hen is as much selfish as her friends since she assessed her friends by their merit. Indeed, her friends are selfish and indifferent from what she is doing. But time and time again, scripture says that we are like the selfish friends – no more or less. As long as we maintain this give and take relationship, the cycle is forever continuing. When Jesus died on the cross as a grain of wheat, he not only broke this chain of sinfulness for good, but also gave us a new life. If so, what do we want to include in the story so that it has a different ending?

We notice that the little Red Hen doesn't stop asking others to join her cause from the beginning until the end. She wants to work together with others. They refuse to help her, and it hurts her. By the time the bread is ready, she is ready to reject her friends too. But then it reminds us of Jesus' answer to the Canaanite woman in Matthew 15:26. On her request to heal her sick daughter, Jesus says to her, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs."³ But she persists in asking – "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."⁴ To this, Jesus praises her faith and grants her what she wants. A new ending may include the little Red Hen's patience and forgiveness of her friends' selfishness and indifference. Forgiveness and love are nature of the covenantal relationship. Otherwise, what will this story teach our children if condemnation and rejection of others are the only ending for such a story?

Although we confess that Jesus fulfilled the new covenant in his life and ministry, the promise of the new covenant has not been fully realized in us. We continue to wrestle with our old sinful hearts. We still need our teachers and preachers. We struggle to distribute forgiveness beyond our small and limited doses. The new covenant, a grain of wheat and the story of the little Red Hen help us rethink our doing in church, too. When we need helping hands to do mission only to see few responses to our request, it may discourage us a lot. Yet, instead of condemning others' selfishness and indifference, we will continue to ask them to join us with gentle hearts. The life of a grain of wheat is to be in hope for harvest, not for despair. Jeremiah's new covenant remains a hope, but it is a hope that is underway and a hope that is certain to arrive fully in God's good time because "the days are surely coming, says the LORD."⁵

³ Matthew 15:26

⁴ Matthew 15:27

⁵ Jeremiah 31:31