

Eucharist and Covenant for the New Year

Isaiah 63: 7-9, Hebrews 2: 10-end and Matthew 2:13 – end

Mother Emma

We have taken our first step into another New Year, many of us still somewhat shaken by the effects of the past few years and looking anxiously at what may lie ahead, as we cope with the cost-of-living crisis, watch nervously the development of conflict and unrest in a growing number of places across the world, and reflect on the huge changes which have taken place in our own nation over the past year. Perhaps we are wondering how our lives, as individuals, as a nation and as a global community may look when this year is over, especially for those who have been forced to flee their own countries and seek relative peace and security elsewhere.

Yet the Scriptures encourage us to put our trust in God, even when things around us seem dark and threatening and painful, and in this hope and trust we may find encouragement and peace. Many of us may think of the words of Minnie Louise Haskins, quoted by King George VI in the dark days of December 1939:

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light, that I may tread safely into the unknown!" And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way." So, I went forth, and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And He led me toward the hills and the breaking of day in the lone East.'

In this promise of hope and security, we hear echoes of the words of Isaiah in our first reading, as he too offers hope to the suffering people of Israel:

'Sing, O heavens; and be joyful, O earth; and break forth into singing, O mountains: for the Lord hath comforted his people, and will have mercy upon his afflicted.'

Some may feel that such statements are simply platitudes, yet as Christians we have the unique privilege of being drawn to Christ, and ourselves becoming more Christ-like.

As we seek to do this, we too may transform the suffering and anxiety of our own lives, into the means to help both ourselves and others. St Paul points to the selflessness and humility required to achieve this:

'Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others. Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus.'

You may remember that last year I explained that for decades, congregations in the Methodist Church have used the start of a New Year as an opportunity to renew their covenant with God; to remember their commitment to follow him and to live a life of faith and devotion.

In recent years, the words of this covenant have been brought across into Anglican liturgy, and they wonderfully emphasise, in the face of change and challenge, the immanence of our God, and the eternal and unchanging nature of the love and hope which he brings, together with the opportunity to offer ourselves fully in Christ's service.

The introduction to the Methodist service explains: *'God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law.'*

The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord, in his life, work, death and resurrection. In this covenant God promises us new life in Christ. For our part we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God.'

To renew this commitment at the start of the New Year places Christ's love and our love for him at the heart of our hopes and plans for the year. It re-focuses us on the permanence of God's presence with us, through joy and sorrow, anxiety and thanksgiving. May I therefore invite you, once again, as I read the words of this New Year covenant, in the stillness of your hearts, to commit yourselves once again to the love of God, and to the living of the new life we have been given in Christ:

Beloved in Christ, let us again claim for ourselves this covenant which God has made with his people, and take upon us the yoke of Christ.

This means that we are content that he appoint us our place and work, and that he himself be our reward.

Christ has many services to be done:

some are easy, others are difficult;

some bring honour, others bring reproach;

some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,

others are contrary to both;

in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;

in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.

Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own.

Let us give ourselves to him, trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

And so we pray:

Eternal God, in your faithful and enduring love you call us to share in your gracious covenant in Jesus Christ.

In obedience we hear and accept your commands;

in love we seek to do your perfect will;

with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.

We are no longer our own but yours.

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 that I have and am

to serve you, as and where you choose.

Glorious and blessed God,

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.