

## Covenant for the New Year, 31<sup>st</sup> December

### Isaiah 34 and Colossians 1: 9-20

#### Mother Emma

We stand today together on the threshold of another New Year. Last year at this service, I spoke of the anxiety we felt at the development of conflict across the world, perhaps especially with regard to the war in Ukraine and the refugees arriving here in Kensington; but with no anticipation of the more recent acts of terror and of war in the Holy Land, which have marked the ending of this year. We do not know how these conflicts will develop during the year ahead, and we are conscious, too, of elections and changes of government due in many countries which may shape way our global community may look when this year is over.

This Christmas we were blessed by a record number of people attending St Mary Abbots' services on 24<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> December – over 1800 in total. I could not help but wonder whether the uncertainties and anxieties of the global situation may be leading more people to turn towards the reassurance and hope which Christ's church can offer.

The Scriptures we hear 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. We are not told to believe that there will be no suffering, but our readings today assure us of God's presence with us throughout everything to strengthen and uplift us, and to guide us into eternal peace.

The prophet Isaiah encourages his people, *"They will see the glory of the Lord, and the excellency of our God. Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come ... and save you."*

Meanwhile the apostle Paul prays for his readers to receive wisdom and spiritual understanding, *"That ye might walk worthy of the Lord ... strengthened with all might, according to his glorious power; unto all patience and longsuffering with joyfulness.* Paul reminds them that Christ has made peace through the cross, to reconcile all things to himself.

As Christians, perhaps what we can offer the world at this time of fear and insecurity is the peace and hope that we share as the result of Christ's coming among us at Christmas, so that he could reconcile the world to himself. To strengthen us to share this faith and love with others, we can commit ourselves once again this year to follow Christ and to offer all that we have to serve him.

The New Year's Covenant which the Church of England has adopted from the Methodist Church emphasises, 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 in Christ's service. The introduction to the Methodist service explains: *"God made a covenant with his chosen people, calling them to be a holy nation, to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law. The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ, 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."*

Renewing 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 invite you, as I read the words of this New Year covenant, to commit yourselves once again to the love of God, and the new life of faith 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 in the stillness of our hearts:*

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.**