

**Sermon preached by The Most Reverend Roger Herft
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**Parish of Beaconsfield
Fifth Sunday in Lent, 29 March 2009**

Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

Jeremiah notes a daring promise of God, 'I will write a new covenant in their hearts'. St John describes some searchers - some Greeks said to Philip, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus."

What if you were granted the opportunity of being God for a day? What would be your priority if you were given that sort of power? Whom would you want to zap? What would be the issues that you would want to tackle in the first instance?

When you looked at the creation that you had so lovingly made, that you had kissed into being, what would you do with that creation and particularly the pinnacle of that creation, humankind?

How would you enable, enhance and encourage this human being, made out of the dust of the earth whom you'd breathed into the very breath of life, hoping that this human person would be attentive to your leading for all eternity, who would relate to you in a special and particular way – what would you do with this human person to win him and her back, to make them love you in a special and particular way? What scheme, what plan would you put in place?

Whenever I visit the prisons and I am asked to lead Bible studies, I always take with me a film, if, of course, I can get it past the censors at the door. I now know which films are allowed - *Shawshank Redemption* is a no-no! Even though I feel it is one of the most powerful films ever made.

The last time I took the film *Bruce Almighty*. Some of you might remember the rather comic figure of Jim Carey, who wants to be God in a rather sadistic way, and Morgan Freeman who acts as the "real God". And as I showed this film, we began to talk about it in the group that met. You recall the film describes Morgan Freeman giving Jim Carey, Bruce, the right to be God to do anything. You will recall that thousands of people have prayed to win the lottery. Anybody win the lottery by the way? Just to remind you of the ten percent tithe that is required, in case you'd forgotten! Bruce responds to their intercessory prayer by letting everybody's prayer be answered, and everyone ended up with about three cents. Everyone gets angry with God, screaming out that "the one time we won the lottery we only get three cents".

And then there is this beautiful segment in the movie where Jim, who is deeply in love with a beautiful girl, against whom he has done so much harm and caused so much difficulty in her life, she decides to leave. He goes to her window and drags the moon down, so he creates this romantic space for her trying desperately to get her to love him. He still cannot win her. One of the prisoners said this beautiful thing to me: "Oh I get it, he can't force us to love him, can he? God can't force us to love him, can he?"

During this period of Lent over the last five weeks, we have used a very special word – 'covenant'. When the Bible uses 'covenant' it has three distinctive ways of understanding it. One is a legal contract that most lawyers would be used to. An agreement that is binding that can be enforced as a consequence of law. The other is a type of engagement with

another person, and there are dos and don'ts within that particular arrangement. And then there is another 'covenant' which speaks of freedom, where one has the freedom to engage with another.

In our engagement with God, that is the word that is used for covenant: it is neither forced nor bought; it is a free will engagement of person with the Divine. Over the past five weeks we have looked at God's desire to bring God's self to us so that we might learn to love God more, to love God as God loves us. And you will recall, as I am sure all of you have been attentive to the sermons in the last four weeks, the first covenant that is spoken about in this Lenten season, is the covenant with Noah. How do we make God love us? God chooses a few people, exterminates the rest and puts a rainbow in the clouds so that we may remember. But at the heart of that covenant is a process of grieving. The reason why God does what God does, in the creation of the rainbow is to portray God's broken heart. Whenever people see the rainbow, says that particular covenant, they will see God's heart breaking for them. In the New Testament reference for that Sunday there is the baptism of Jesus and his temptation - God's heart being broken in the testing of Jesus.

The second covenant we come across is the Abrahamic covenant where even though Abraham is past his years and Sarai is past her years, God says, 'I will make a great nation of you, I will bless you'. So from nothing, everything will come to fruition and God desires this for Abraham. Here is another aspect of covenant - God blesses us so that even from our empty lives some fulfilment can come about. We are blessed in our emptiness. What about others who are not? That is another aspect of covenant that the Hebrew scriptures bring to us.

Interestingly in the New Testament lesson on the second Sunday in Lent, we find Peter saying, 'I will follow you. You are the Christ, the son of the Living God', and then the moment Jesus speaks about the Cross and his dying on the Cross, giving himself up in shame and agony for the love of the world, Peter rebukes him and says, 'Here we are on a populist wave and you go and muck things up by this Cross business. Just don't go public on that sort of thing, you know? I mean, tone your language down in this cross business.' And Jesus rebukes Peter in a very harsh way: 'Get behind me, Satan!' Blessings are going to come in this covenant to all through the self-emptying God on the Cross.

On the third Sunday in Lent we had that remarkable passage with the thunder and lightning, the fire and the wind, and Moses on the top of Mount Sinai receiving the great Ten Commandments. How are we going to live in this covenant with God? Is it through following his commandments, the awesome commandments of God? And the answer to that, of course in the New Testament, is the cleansing of the temple. If, in fact, in keeping your commands and God's commands you are actually driving people out, exploiting people, excluding people from where God wants them to be, then you are acting against the law of God. One of the most significant places that had been taken over in the New Testament description of the temple activity was the part reserved for the poor, the blind and the maimed. In keeping the commandments in the temple they had excluded those most distressed and desolate people. So how is a covenant to be kept? Is it to be kept by law, and by keeping the law do we exclude other people?

Last Sunday we had the remarkable story of the serpents. The Israelites had come through this huge adventure of the Exodus. They had been wandering and were moving towards the Promised Land. Everything seemed to be working against them as a covenant people. The eternal song of the covenant people was grumbling and moaning and groaning. Sad isn't it? So Moses is quite distressed. He talks to God again and says, 'These are a miserable mob; they're whingeing from morning to night; I can't stand it anymore'. And God says, "I'll sort that out, no worries," and sends the serpents who bite them, changing their tune. They quietly gave up grumbling and said to Moses, 'Look what's happening; we're in serious trouble here.'

And then the wonderful response. God asks Moses to make a bronze serpent. Of course, bronze in the Hebrew Scriptures refers to a mirror. Every time they looked at themselves in the mirror, moaning and groaning and whingeing, they saw their true selves. And of course the New Testament response to that last Sunday was that wonderful passage from John's Gospel: 'As the serpent was lifted up, so will I be lifted up. Maybe now you will learn your true self by looking at me'. For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. So God sent his Son into the world, not to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved.

And today of course, we find, that maybe God has finally got it right, love God freely and well. God says, in the prophet Jeremiah, 'OK, I will write the love covenant into their hearts. No more laws here and there, I'm going to write this in the very fabric of their being. And so once they've got this encoded, the moment I key in the code, they love.' Is that how it happens? Is that how the coded system works?

Today Philip is approached by some Greeks in John's Gospel, and they say to him, 'We have tried everything; we have tried all those four aspects of the covenant that you speak about. We want to see Jesus.' The word 'see' of course, in John's Gospel means we want to learn to love him. But the moment Philip tells Jesus this, Jesus' response is quite challenging. He does not say, 'Let's have a cup of tea now with the Greeks'. He immediately says, 'The Son of Man is to die. Except a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Now is the hour for the Son of Man to be glorified.' Again, the response to the concept of covenant that is given to the Greeks is that there is another way in which God loves. God does not force love upon people, God does not contract love with people, God does not legalise love with people, God does not punch in a code: God calls forth love.

Rabbi Sir Jonathan Sacks, in understanding this covenant, talks about the march he had with the Lambeth bishops for the Millennium Development Goals. As he marches through the streets of London with his granddaughter, he comes across the Houses of Parliament, Westminster, and the little girl says to him, 'Granddad what's this about?' and he says, 'Well, that's a special covenant that the people of Britain have with their powers. This is where power is accumulated and power is distributed.' She nods her head wisely, and as they go along a little further on, she looks and sees the great Bank of England, (this was before we knew what was really going on there). She says to him, 'Granddad, what happens there?' and Jonathan Sacks responds, 'Well, that's where wealth is accumulated and distributed', and we know now how some of that was distributed. Then they come to St Paul's Cathedral in London, and she says, 'Granddad, what's that place? What happens there - what is accumulated there and what is distributed there?' And her Granddad says, 'What is accumulated there and what is distributed there is not love forced upon people, or love bought, but love as it is – it is the covenant of wisdom and steadfast love.'

Today as you and I enter into this sacred place of covenant, remember what I asked you at the beginning: What would it mean if you were given the power to be God for a day? What would you do with it; what would be your priorities be? And how would you make humankind love you? Well, the answer is found in one of Thomas Merton's remarkable works, where Merton points out that every single one of us is a living covenant, sparkling, dazzling with the glory and goodness of the loving of God. Perhaps the only covenant of God's loving that people in our world will see, is you, is me: fragile, weak as we are, we are a dazzling part of this loving covenant that God has made with us in Christ Jesus, crucified and risen.

So God, help us to see Jesus.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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