

**Downing Place United Reformed Church
Cambridge**

**Sunday 16th February 2020
Epiphany VI**

Sermon – Communion II

Genesis 12.1-9; I Corinthians 12.1-11

Holy Communion is a staple of Christian worship. That said, whereas for some it is absolutely definitive for their faith, for others it is something of an optional extra – they can take it or leave it. Either way, as the life of Downing Place Church evolves it is right that we should give thought to what communion means, and so it is that we have the second in our short series of sermons on the matter.

When I became a member of the United Reformed Church in 1979, I was given a membership card, which still lives inside my King James Bible. The wording assured me of God's grace toward me in Jesus Christ, and exhorted me to display various marks of discipleship. They included reading the Bible devotionally, praying regularly, giving generously and attending church meeting conscientiously. The last exhortation read, '... Be present at the Lord's Supper to receive the great gifts of his Love. renew your covenant in company with your fellow members.'

For me, exploration of communion is assisted as we look at that word 'covenant'. In many ways, covenant sums up the nature of the relationship that God establishes with us. From the iridescent rainbow to the effulgent empty tomb, the Bible is threaded through with marvellous intimations of God's covenant love for all that is, and of just how reliable it is. Remember Abram and Sarah. Easy though it would be in their old age to tread water, they are inspired rather to up sticks and journey with God, in the confidence that God will be their God – not just *with* them, but *for* them. That is God's covenant promise: 'I will bless you so that you will be a blessing'. It emboldens them for their life on the move. Travelling into the unknown, Abram and his family arrive at new places where they come to believe God will bless them anew. As witness to their pilgrim God, they build an altar – at Shechem, at Bethel, wherever they are, they establish an altar as a means of remembering, a sign and seal of the covenant that God has made with them. It's the covenant they can see revealed as they look back at their yesterdays, it's the covenant by which they are sustained for their adventurous todays, and it's the covenant by which they derive hope for all their tomorrows. Ultimately, it is the covenant that finds supreme expression in Jesus Christ, given because God loved the world so much, and through whom God goes the way of suffering and death for that world's salvation.

Confidence in exactly that covenant is one of the golden threads that sustains us millennia later. Did not the people of Emmanuel and St Columba's Churches – some of us making Abram and Sarai seem like the youth club! - hear God calling us to up sticks; to go from home and family to the new place God would show us? It wasn't an easy decision; forsaking the familiar that we regard so fondly could never be costless. But the God who loves the world so much that the only Son was given, that very God has made covenant with us. Here in twenty-first century Cambridge, we, too, are journeying neither alone nor without purpose.

I wonder if you are like me, and indeed, like Abram and Sarai, in needing to bring that covenant to mind on a regular basis, to nourish our awareness of it, to deepen our trust in it? And herein lies another of the crucial reasons that we celebrate Holy Communion. As we journey onwards, still largely into the unknown – for who knows what the future holds for us as individuals, or as Downing Place Church? – we return time and again to this table. As bread is broken and wine is poured, as the Holy Spirit is invoked, we receive the real presence of Christ for the building up of our Christian life. Reaching out to take the elements we are responding to God's covenant with us; we are answering God's covenant with ours. God says you will be my people, and we say, you will be our God. If the elements are brought to us in our seats, then God's reaching out to us just as we are is accented; if we come forward to receive them, then our gratefully active response is accented. Neither is right or wrong, but maybe each is as meaningful as the other.

Communion is not, of course, where our apprehension of this covenant begins. The other sacrament that Jesus Christ gives is Baptism. For us, as it did for Jesus, baptism marks once and forever the beginning of our Christian life – of our immersion into the Covenant - and communion is the frequent complement to baptism, so that we are constantly caught up afresh into the covenant. It's not that communion re-does anything that Baptism signifies, but rather that it ensures we are forever maturing in our life baptised into Christ. In the words printed at the end of today's order of service, we can see how Daniel Migliore sums up this dovetailed relationship between the two dominical sacraments. He refers to communion as the Lord's Supper.

- If baptism is the sacrament of the foundation of Christian life on God's grace, the Lord's Supper is the Sacrament of the sustaining of Christian life by that same grace.
- If baptism is the sacrament of the beginning of Christian life, the Lord's Supper is the sacrament of growth and nourishment in Christian life.
- If baptism marks the gift of God's love that welcomes us into new community and confirms our solidarity with Christ and with others, the Lord's Supper marks God's continued sharing of life and love that gives strength to the new community and motivates it for service in the world.

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In that last point, Migliore helpfully alerts us to another important feature of covenant in the Christian life. Even as we come to believe that God makes covenant with us, and calls us to make the answering covenant of faith, so also God calls us to live out our covenant with God *in our covenant with one another*. This is an element of the Christian life with which the embryonic church in Corinth struggled. There was quite a bit about their Christian life for which Paul praises them – their witness to the Gospel seems to have been pretty impressive, and first Corinthians begins, 'I give thanks to my God always for you ...' But the Corinthian Church was no more faultless than we are. There was dissension and division. There was a tendency to be in cliques; to be partisan followers of one leader compared with another. So it is that in the Corinthian correspondence Paul combines affirmation with critique. When we get to the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians from which we heard this morning, Paul is urging people for whom he has real affection to act truly as a body – as inter-dependent as the limbs and organs of the human body, which though different from each other in appearance and purpose, are each utterly essential if the body – the church – is to function properly. Later, he uses their coming to communion where they are encouraged in their covenant relationship with God as a particular illustration of how important it is to be people who, in reconciled diversity, inhabit a covenant relationship with one another. Just as steadfast loving kindness characterises God's covenant with us, so aspiring to love one another, enabled by the Holy Spirit, is to characterise our mutual covenant as the Christian community enjoying table fellowship. In this morning's anthem, Jesus sums it up with exquisite simplicity: 'I give to you a new commandment that you love one another as I have loved you.'

So, communion and covenant belong side by side. As the church, we live in covenant with God and with each other, and we come to this table to celebrate, to rekindle our awareness of that covenant. Of course, as with any family gathered around its meal table, the time comes for the church to rise and return to our life and work – to live out in the world the covenant that God in Christ makes not just with you and me but with the cosmos. That is why a covenant relationship with God and with one another beckons us irresistibly into a covenant with the planet and with all its peoples, too, and with none more than with the most marginalised. Is it not the authenticity of that earth-bound covenant which gives the truth to anything we might claim about being in covenant with God? After all, being stewards of all that is, is rather less about neglecting, exploiting or abusing it and more about treating it with a Christ-like self-emptying covenant love.

'Be present at the Lord's Supper to receive the great gifts of his Love. renew your covenant,' for as Jeremiah heard God say, 'I have loved you with an everlasting love; I have continued my faithfulness to you.' Jeremiah 31.3

Thanks be to God.

Amen

N. P. Uden
16th February 2020