

Lickey, 13th March 22.
Genesis 15: 1-12; 17-18.
Luke 13: 31-end

Before the Genesis reading.

In about 1800 BC God chooses Abram, a nomad who lived in the basin created by the Euphrates and the Tigris in modern day Iraq, (previously Babylon, Assyria) and was probably a moon worshipper.

In Genesis 12 God makes a promise that He will make Abram into a great nation and all people will be blessed through him.
Having called Abram to be a blessing, God establishes a covenant with him.

The pattern of the Old Testament is that whenever God makes a promise was made, it is always sealed with a covenant, most frequently expressed with the words: "I will be your God and you will be my people".

A covenant is an agreement between two parties that brings the two into an experience of oneness. In the Old Testament covenant was the fabric of society. Monarchs and subjects would make covenants. A king would confer upon his subjects the right to be in covenant with him. When a nation was conquered, the conqueror would give rights to the conquered to be included in the greater society.

There are two ways to have a covenant. In the first, two equal parties agree to become one. In the second, two unequal parties become one. In this, the one who is greater and stronger confers upon the weaker the right to come into an equal relationship.

In the Bible, the type of covenant is usually the stronger to the weaker. Because usually it is between God and people. God confers rights on human beings. But it is still a relationship of oneness.

Having called Abram in Genesis 12, in chapter 15 of Genesis God is ready to ratify His promise to him. At that time when a covenant was made it was always ratified in blood. It usually involved the exchange of property, and often included a change of name and the scarring of the person's flesh.

It was a serious affair – it meant that life was going to change. If two tribes entered into a covenant together, they slaughtered their animals – a precious possession. The old life ends, a new begins. The life of the animal symbolised this death. They partook in a blood covenant by creating a corridor of blood. At each end of the corridor stood the representatives of the tribes – the chief or groom. They exchanged places by walking along the corridor of blood.

For example, if a tribe of cattle keepers and sheep keepers changed places, they would be signifying this: "We who once looked after cattle, now look after cattle and sheep," and vice versa. We possess everything of each other. We two have become one.

They changed their names and to indicate it was a lifelong covenant, two representatives would cut the heel of a hand and rub mud in it to keep the scar there forever. There was a new oneness between what had been a twoness.

Sermon

I don't know if it's just me, but I haven't always been secure in my Christian identity. I remember when I first came to Christ I prayed the prayer about 30 times because I wasn't sure it had really stuck. And since then my sense of feeling secure in God's love has gone up and down. I find this with a lot of people to be honest. I feel it comes out in the way that we think that there are somehow better or worse Christians. The assumption underneath that is that your behaviour or your knowledge has anything to do with it. We can feel that our report card always reads "Could do better".

Well, what I love about this amazing, and to us a bit strange, story from Genesis is that it unfolds the kind of relationship that God wants with us. This story, and the way in which all through the Bible God always wants a covenant relationship with us, tells us that the issue of your relationship with God is settled. It's done.

Abram has received the promise – that he would become a great nation, a blessing, but in Genesis 15 he worries that has no heir who would make this promise possible and questions God. It's good to know that Abram had these insecurities as well!

In response God tells him to count the stars in the sky, and then bring Him a heffer, and a goat, and a ram. Abram splits them in half and lays out the pieces to create a corridor of blood.

"When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking brazier with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land..." (Genesis 15: 17,18)

Abram is now one with God in a way that's never been known before. The God of heaven has made a covenant with a human being. There has been blood. And there has been an exchange. Everything that belongs to God is now available to Abram. The land belongs to God but is now available to Abram. However, this is not an exchange of property – Abram gives nothing to God in return. It's God who moves down the corridor – the stronger to the weaker. This is not an equal exchange. It is God's initiative – nothing to do with anything Abram has done, or has to offer.

What about a new name? In Genesis 17 when Abram is ninety-nine years old, with no children, he still wants reassurance from God. So God graciously says, "I will confirm my covenant between me and you..." He gives Abram a new covenantal name, to remind him of his new identity. "No longer will you be called Abram (exalted father); your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a "father of many nations". (Genesis 17: 5).

To do this, in Hebrew God took from his name YHWH one of the pieces of his name and included it in Abram to become Abraham.

And what about a scar? To show this is permanent? God gives a sign of the covenant: "Every male shall be circumcised".

Crucially, in the days of Abraham, a man who walked along the street with a visible scar was to be feared – you didn't know who he was in covenant with. But God institutes a personal, private scar, signifying a private and personal relationship.

If we can get our heads around these symbols, which carry right on through the Bible, we can see that what God is doing is offering human beings the most profound bond which nothing can break. The issue of Abraham's relationship with God is settled - once and for all.

And this is the kind of relationship that God invites you into - a covenant relationship.

If this all seems a bit hard to grasp, God has given us a very contemporary lived experience of covenant which is common to human relationships. I'm talking about the covenant of marriage. For me marriage has been the best way of seeing what this means. In fact, it's no coincidence that Jesus says he is the bridegroom and we are the bride and that we are looking forward to that day when the bride of Christ will be reunited once again with him.

For Christians marriage is not a legal arrangement, a contract, or something that we do for one another. Marriage is a covenant relationship before God.

When I got married to Ruth there was an exchange. All that I had - my few vinyl records and some scruffy clothes - became hers. And all that she had - her grace, her beauty, her style, her good taste in men - became mine. We said words of exchange in the service. "All that I am I give to you and all that I have I share with you within the love of God." You'll be glad to know there wasn't literally any blood involved but the Bible talks about us becoming one flesh.

There was a new name. She was a Wilson and she became a Donegan- Cross. These days people do that in different ways, but the sense of having a joint identity in our names is still a strong one.

And there is a scar - a ring around our fingers, carrying the idea that there is something visibly permanent that has changed. Personally I was kind of glad that we'd moved on from the Abrahamic covenants in that respect.

The point is that when we got married the relationship was settled. Our covenant had settled it. Can you imagine if I had gone to Ruth a week after we got married and said, "Do you know what love? I'm just not feeling sure whether it's stuck or not. I don't know if I did it right"? I think she might have just looked at me with disbelief. "Guy – our relationship is settled." Or if I'd said to her, "I'm not sure if I'm doing enough or I'm good enough?" Well, she might have agreed with me on that one, but the point of being married is to know that the relationship is settled. You don't keep your vows. Your vows keep you.

If you're married it should settle the sense of what your relationship is. What God wanted for Abraham, and what God wants for each of us, is to know that the relationship is settled. We are already approved of. We are already loved.

Jesus was determined that his disciples should know this. So how did he express this covenant relationship? The night before he died he had supper with his friends. And taking the cup he said, "This is *my blood of the renewed covenant* which is shed for you and for many."

In the covenant that we have with Jesus there is a profound exchange. For us it means we are now "in Christ". You are "in Christ" because all that is true of him *now becomes true of you*. This means that when God sees you - he sees Christ. You have the same status before God as Jesus. You have his authority. You have his identity. *Paul describes it as an inheritance, saying we are "heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ..."* (Romans 8: 16-17)

Why? Not because you are special. Not because you are clever. Not because you are ordained. But because there is a *covenant relationship* in which everything that is true of Jesus gets put on you - his righteousness, his sinlessness, his glory.

But what's equally true is that everything that is true of us has been put on Jesus. That is the exchange. If we receive Jesus righteousness, what does he receive about us? Well, anything of which you are ashamed has been put on him. Anything which you feel guilty about has been placed on him. All your hidden secrets, all your anxieties, your mortality, all your sense of unworthiness - has been taken off you and placed on him. That is the exchange. Your report card never says "Could do better". It says "Found in Christ."

And there is a name change as well. We bear His name - we are now Christ-ians. In the early church when you were baptised - a sign of the covenant - you got a new name - your Christian name.

And what about a scar? *As a Christian you are marked. But you will be glad to know that* "Circumcision is of the heart by the Spirit." (Romans 2:29). Paul's teaching is that the Holy Spirit has made a scar which is so intimate it is not on our bodies but within us - on the heart - the inner person. "Having believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance..." (Ephesians 1: 13-14)

What's really moving for me is that after he was raised Jesus still bore his scars. Why was that? Because they were there signs of his covenant with us. When the resurrected Jesus appears and shows his disciples his scars first of all he is saying, "This is a covenant. Not only is it ratified in blood, but it's an everlasting covenant... These scars are precious tokens of the covenant I have with you. I am proud of my covenant scars. Why would I ever remove them?"

And what about blood? There is no shedding of blood needed by us to be part of this covenant relationship. But Jesus passed through a corridor his own blood - to make this covenant with us forever. Look at his determination in Luke. Nothing is going to stop him.

"Go tell that fox, 'I will keep on driving out demons and healing people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.'

I must press on today and tomorrow and the next day—for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!

He weeps over God's covenant people who do not realise how deeply they are loved. But he will continue to Jerusalem, down the corridor of blood in order to make that glorious exchange.

So the relationship God offers is one of the deepest imaginable - a covenant, a marriage, forever, sealed with blood. God says to you this morning, "All that I am I give to you - even my life - and all that I have I share with you. The relationship is settled. I take you to be my covenant partner for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish. But not till death us do part - but through the death I have offered - my bride price for you.

Who is God? A God who will go to any length possible to make a covenant with us.

And who are you? Your relationship with him is settled - you are His beloved, His partner, His bride.

The application of this is in our hearts.

Can you and I rest in the peace of this?

Can we obey Him, not to gain an identity, but because we have been *given* one?

And can we stop being anxious about whether we are good enough, or doing enough, but simply serve Him because, like Abraham, this is the truest expression of who we are?