

At the beginning of the year Methodists around the world renew their covenant with God. It is a tradition that we have received from John Wesley. The service provides an opportunity to rededicate ourselves as we embrace again the riches of what Christ offers. This pamphlet introduces the history of covenant renewal.

Origins

The practice of covenant-making goes back to before recorded time. One source suggests that the Hebrew word for covenant 'berith', is of Assyrian origin, meaning bond on the one hand and alliance on the other. In the ancient Near East covenants were entered into for business, political and military reasons. Mutual loyalty and obligation were the central motifs.

Hebrew heritage

The Hebrew religious tradition transformed the notion of covenant. Something unheard of happens. The God of the Hebrews, Yahweh, reaches out to this people and seeks to enter a covenant with them. This covenant with Israel came as a gift of grace. It was not earned – it did not depend on anything Israel had done. “The Lord did not love you and choose you because you outnumbered other peoples; you were the smallest nation on earth. But the Lord loved you and wanted to keep the promise he made to your ancestors.” (Deuteronomy 7:7)

From the scriptural accounts we can see that Yahweh made a number of covenants with individuals. In the covenant with Noah there is the striking promise from God to preserve not only humankind, but to be in solidarity with all creation. Walter Brueggemann comments, “The God who commits to Israel is the God who commits to the well-being of creation.”

Covenant at Sinai

It was at the foot of Mt Sinai that Moses read the text of the Law from the tablets given by Yahweh. In order to seal the covenant, the blood of an animal was caught in a basin. Half the blood was spread over the altar as a sign of the dedication of the people: the rest of the blood was sprinkled over the people, as a sign of divine acceptance.

Though we may not be attracted to this practice, it is possible to understand the intention. The ritual was a celebration of covenant – from this time on Yahweh and the people would share a common life. The future of this people was to be in relationship with God, and the future of God was caught up with this people. The Old Testament may be read as the history of this covenant relationship.

Privilege and burden

Covenant became the foundation of the religion of Israel. Covenant relationship gave privileges and responsibilities. Yahweh promised to be faithful to this people. They were to enjoy God's provision and protection. They received the gift of the law to guide them in the way of righteousness. There would be sanctions for breaking the covenant.

In their turn the people promised to be faithful to God, to keep the law and to worship only Yahweh. To worship other gods would be to break the covenant. To exploit the weak and vulnerable would be to break the covenant. The covenant meant that God had made a commitment to Israel and Israel had made a commitment to Yahweh.

Unconditional love

Scripture records how Israel's faithfulness to the covenant faltered. Exile was interpreted as punishment for disobedience. Many saw exile as God abandoning the covenant relationship because of Israel's worship of other gods. Out of this theological crisis in Israel's life came an astonishing new discovery: “This affirmation is that YHWH's love for Israel is unilateral, does not depend on Israel's obedience and therefore can be relied upon in every circumstance ...Israel's deepest affirmation of God's trustworthiness is made in the midst of Israel's greatest tribulation.” (Brueggemann)

God is challenged

If God expected Israel to be a faithful people, there were occasions on which the people wondered about God's faithfulness to the covenant relationship. Some of the most poignant moments in scripture are those in which Abraham and Moses and others challenge God to be just and faithful, and to act with moral intent. Covenant provides the safe and secure context in which reciprocity is expected and indeed demanded.

The open covenant

In Jesus, the process of covenant making and covenant renewal continues. There are parallels with the way in which covenant was first pledged. Now Jesus offers his life and a new or extended covenant is made to include the Gentiles in the saving purposes of God. The grace of God is seen by Jesus to have a universal scope.

In this distinctive covenant relationship reaching right back to the beginning of Israel's life, we are invited to participate. God's concern is for relationship and partnership. We are co-creators with God. Covenant anticipates shalom, a harmony of liberties. The commitment that we make in Christ is both personal and communal, for today and tomorrow. It builds on the past and creates hope for the future. Covenant is the context where promises are made and trust is nurtured.

Covenant relationship

"Covenant occurs when two individuals or groups, differing perhaps in power, but each acknowledging the integrity and sovereignty of the other, pledge themselves in mutual loyalty to achieve together what neither can achieve alone. Covenant is the use of language to create a bond of trust through the word given, the word received, the word honoured in mutual fidelity."

Jonathan Sacks

The Dignity of Difference p. 202

This *Little Essay* by Terry Wall is made available within the Methodist Church by The Faith & Order Committee.

The Methodist Church of New Zealand
Te Hahi Weteriana o Aotearoa

Covenant Renewal



Come, follow me, says the Lord, and I will make you fishers of men.

'I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things...'

Covenant Service