

# GOING FORWARD together LIVING IN GOD'S Covenant



## Week 3 - Covenant: God's Gift of Christ Bible Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Luke 22:14-20

TEACH - Content to help inform a sermon or small group outline

### Introduction

- God loves people.
- God is relentless in his loving movement towards us. He doesn't give up - on anyone!
- 'God loves people' is the reality that informs and drives the idea of covenant. A covenant isn't a deal or a bargaining position that results in a contract. It is the foundation of an everlasting relationship between God and people that reveals the incredible truth, that God wants to be with us... to love us.

### Exploration

#### 1. Broken covenants

- The same cannot be said of us, as Jeremiah points out in Jeremiah 31:32. It seems that humankind are the ones who are prone to break the covenant - it has never been broken by God, and never will be!

<sup>31</sup> 'That's right. The time is coming when I will make a brand-new covenant with Israel and Judah. <sup>32</sup> It won't be a repeat of the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took their hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt. They broke that covenant even though I did my part as their Master.' God's Decree. <sup>33</sup> 'This is the brand-new covenant that I will make with Israel when the time comes. I will put my law within them - write it on their hearts! - and be their God. And they will be my people. <sup>34</sup> They will no longer go around setting up schools to teach each other about God. They'll know me firsthand, the dull and the bright, the smart and the slow. I'll wipe the slate clean for each of them. I'll forget they ever sinned!' God's Decree.

Jeremiah 31:31-34 (MSG)

- There is nothing contractual about this covenant, as in the 'you do this and I'll do that' type of bargaining that depends on compliance and co-operation from both parties.
- Jeremiah suggests that the days of contractually based covenants are over and that God is doing something 'brand-new' (v33). The proposal being placed before us is that God is saying, 'I am going to do it all from my side of our relationship.' This



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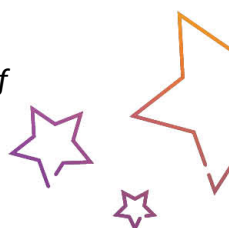
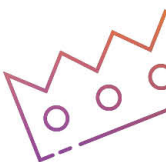
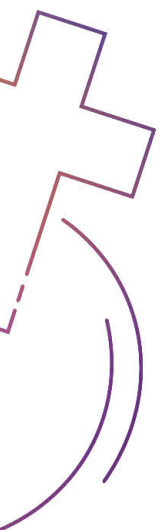


goes against humanity's ideas of what is right and fair! But God says, 'I will do it all - and I will never give up on you!' This the foundation of grace and mercy.

- A contract is based on our ability to bring something to the relationship; it is heavily biased towards our ability to keep our side of the deal. It implies that we can earn or deserve God's love, favour and help. Human pride revels at such a prospect.
- The humiliating reality (for human ego) is that covenant love is not based on this kind of thinking. God knows that we humans can never keep our side of the agreement. We break the covenant, mess up and fail to measure up - this is the human story. The premise of grace is that God does it all for us... God fills up the gaps and cracks with his mercy and grace.
- Quote - *'There's a crack in almost everything, That's how the light gets in.'* (Leonard Cohen, 'Anthem' from 1992 album *The Future*)

## 2. Broken Justice

- The movement from retributive (punishment based) to restorative justice is based on the concept of God's covenant love.
- For most of human history, justice in the form of a legalistic system informs most societies' idea of justice - where people get what they deserve for their crimes. While this provides a basis for legal and court systems, it is rather limited in its scope, and often leaves victims disappointed, hurt and angry. It does nothing much for victims of crime, nor does it address the causes of crime.
- Quote - *'This life isn't fair. If you always INSIST on justice, you'll be angry all of your life. (Don't make a 'god' out of justice.)'* (David Riddell)
- Restorative justice seeks to heal and restore people.
- Reflect on how parents often love their children unconditionally. In such a relationship, the parent does not expect the child to merit or earn their love... the parent realises that little children aren't capable of earning love and care by behaving or performing to order. A good parent's love is not conditional on their child's capacity to earn or merit their love, although the child's capacity to love is often developed within this context.
- Love can be reciprocated naturally as the child absorbs the parents' love. This kind of relationship *transforms* both the child and the parent.
- Quote - *'Unfortunately, the most common view of God's judgment is retributive justice, which appeals to the ego, rather than restorative justice, which brings true transformation.'* (Richard Rohr: *Essential Teachings on Love*)
- God's love transforms everything and heals the damage that is done to relationships. Human experience suggests that retributive justice does not work very well in families... or in any other context! Good parents love their children unconditionally, even if there is personal hurt and cost in loving this way, and as such this reflects the way in which God loves people.
- Quote - *'There are very few people who realise what God would make of them if they abandoned themselves into his hands, and let themselves be formed by his grace.'* (Saint Ignatius)



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- Going forward together in covenant means that we must love each other to the extent that all of our relationships are transformed. The Church is to be characterised by the extent of our love for others. She is a loving, tolerant, accepting and inclusive community of people that is like nothing else on the planet.
- Quote - *'Now there is a final reason I think that Jesus says, "Love your enemies." It is this: that love has within it a redemptive power. And there is a power there that eventually transforms individuals. Just keep being friendly to that person. Just keep loving them, and they can't stand it too long... and sometimes they'll hate you a little more at that transition period, but just keep loving them. And by the power of your love they will break down under the load. That's love, you see. It is redemptive, and this is why Jesus says love...' (Dr Martin Luther King Jr)*

### 3. Broken Bread (God in Christ)

- At the Last Supper (Luke 22:14-20) Jesus announces a new covenant (v20). His willingness to lay down his life underlines the radical basis for relationship that will heal and transform the world.  
*<sup>14</sup> When it was time, he sat down, all the apostles with him, <sup>15</sup>and said, 'You've no idea how much I have looked forward to eating this Passover meal with you before I enter my time of suffering. <sup>16</sup>-It's the last one I'll eat until we all eat it together in the kingdom of God.' <sup>17</sup>-Taking the cup, he blessed it, then said, 'Take this and pass it among you. <sup>18</sup>-As for me, I'll not drink wine again until the kingdom of God arrives.' <sup>19</sup>-Taking bread, he blessed it, broke it, and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, given for you. Eat it in my memory.' <sup>20</sup>-He did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant written in my blood, blood poured out for you.'*

Luke 22:14-20 (MSG)

- The breaking and blessing (note the contrast indicated in the two words) of the bread imply that brokenness and healing (death and resurrection) are key components of human relationships and the means by which humanity will flourish and thrive.
- Quote - *'My all is in the Master's hands  
For him to bless and break;  
Beyond the brook his winepress stands  
And thence my way I take,  
Resolved the whole of love's demands  
To give for his dear sake.'* (Albert Orsborn, SASB 610)



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## Conclusion

- Christ's covenant with us is one of grace, a covenant of the heart.
- God's restorative love transforms relationships.
- In following the example of Jesus, in the laying down of our lives so that others can pick up theirs, we arrive at the heart of discipleship and we share God's vision of the new Kingdom community.

## REFLECT - questions for discussion/small groups

## Personal

- Jeremiah seems to suggest that instead of punishing us, God decides to love us all the more. Can you think of an example of when you experienced this kind of love? When did you offer it to someone else?
- In your corps or family, what specifically can you name and thank God for as you reflect on his covenant of love?

## Community

- In what ways is our corps fellowship 'a loving, tolerant, accepting and inclusive community of people that is like nothing else on the planet'? In what ways are you loving, tolerant, accepting and inclusive? How can you be more like this?
- 'Going forward together' - is there one thing that might enable your fellowship to move forward? What might be preventing the fellowship moving forward? Offer prayers for wisdom for your corps leaders.



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ENGAGE - Interactive ideas for prayer, worship and mission

## An illustration



*In Japanese culture there is an ancient tradition called Kintsugi. When a piece of pottery breaks, rather than discarding it, it is bound together again using gold, silver or platinum. 'This repair method celebrates each artefact's unique history by emphasising its fractures and breaks instead of hiding or disguising them. Kintsugi often makes the repaired piece even more beautiful than the original, revitalising it with new life.'*

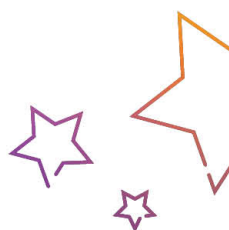
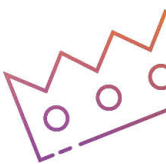
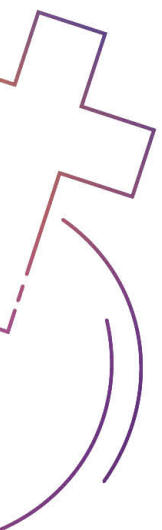
- **Mosaics:** Using broken pieces to make a larger image, a mosaic, could also be used as an illustration of seemingly worthless things making something beautiful.
- **Old vs New:** Under the old covenant, humankind had to 'prove' themselves to God through their actions. Have everyone stand up and tell them they'll receive a reward (name something that is safe and easy to share, eg prewrapped chocolates like Celebrations) if they can complete the task you set out. Instruct them to complete 66 jumping jacks... while reciting the books of the Bible backwards without hesitation. Give them five minutes. This should be near impossible to the average person - just as keeping the terms of the old covenant was. Once everyone has caught their breath - or given up - give out the rewards anyway to illustrate grace in the new covenant.
- **Something from 'nothing':** Invite two volunteers up, and tell them they must make a useable product from the items on the table. They will need to present their product to the rest of the corps. Give them each a wire hanger, tubes from toilet roll, newspapers and some string. Set an appropriate length of time. Challenge everyone to go home and see what they can purpose instead of throwing away. Eg turn an old/broken globe into a lightshade.
- **Video discussions:** [Restorative justice](#) hosts a range of video clips with real-life stories and personal accounts on restorative justice. Why not watch one (screen beforehand as some may not be suitable for the audience) and discuss the content. How is this different from justice as we know it? How is this method of justice like Christ's work on the cross?



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- **Forgiveness at the cross:** The prophet Jeremiah and Jesus himself each speak of a new covenant. It will be sealed with the blood of Christ through his death on the cross. The new covenant enables God's people to experience forgiveness. This being said, sometimes it's difficult to receive God's forgiveness, and at times we may find it difficult to forgive others; but the cross is the ultimate symbol of God's forgiveness and the perfect place to find healing. Set up a cross in your meeting room and provide a supply of hammers and nails. Encourage everyone to write down the names of any people or situations in their lives that need the healing touch of forgiveness. Invite them to nail the 'offence' to the cross and release the situation into God's hands (you may choose to use sticky notes, or simply allow individuals to place their notes at the foot of the cross to prevent shared utensils). If you are taking part in an online service, this activity can be done using a picture of the cross and sticky notes.
- **Illustration of God's forgiveness:** People need forgiveness because sin separates humankind from God. Taking a coffee filter, lightly write on it in pencil some things people do that create a rift between themselves and God. Place the filter in a bowl or shallow pan and explain that the blood of Christ covers over all sin. Drop several drops of red food colour on the filter until it is mostly red. Carefully hold it up to show how the 'blood' made the sins disappear. This can be done at home with children.  
(<https://classroom.synonym.com/fun-crafts-lessons-gods-forgiveness-8274928.html>)
- **Broken (or not):** There are a range of activities that can be done using eggs (hard boil these before you start if you're concerned about mess).
  - **Egg Tower:** Split the group into two teams. Give each team some newspapers, a roll of Sellotape and an egg. Ask each team to build as tall a tower as possible that will support the egg within a given amount of time.
  - **Egg Throw:** Couples stand one pace apart and toss an egg to each other. They step back one pace each toss. The winning couple is the one which is the furthest apart with their egg still intact.
  - **Egg and Spoon Race:** Create an obstacle course at home, and complete it keeping your egg on your spoon at all times. These can be recorded and shared.
  - **The Egg Case:** The goal is to create a container that will safely deposit a raw egg on to the ground when it is dropped from something high. Challenge the congregation to record the highest they can successfully drop their egg without it breaking.
  - **Egg Shell Candles:** Use real hollow egg shells to create a votive candle. Instructions can be found online [see here](#).



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## PRAY - Prayer liturgies for different contexts

O God, we cry to you in our anger that people hurt each other.

**Be with us and heal us, O God.**

We feel the fear and pain of an innocent and trusting child.

**Be with us and heal us, O God.**

We carry with us things that have been done to us which hurt and destroy.

**Be with us and heal us, O God.**

They stand before us and weigh us down. They stop us living with joy and hope.

**Be with us and heal us, O God.**

Lift us up on the wings of your Spirit.

**Be with us and heal us, O God.**

For you are stronger than all the forces that stand against us.

Set us free, heal our wounds, O God who never leaves us nor forsakes us. **Amen.**

(‘Service of Healing’, Dorothy McRae McMahon in *Human Rites*, Hannah Ward and Jennifer Wild, editors (Mowbray 1995), 135.<sup>1</sup>)

God of love,

Help us to live beyond our experiences of suffering and to respond to acts of harm with mercy rather than vengeance. Guide us as we seek opportunities for reconciliation and transformation, and give us the grace to stand against a culture of violence for a world of peace. Amen.

<sup>1</sup> Through research, projects, workshops and presentations, the CCJC promotes education on restorative justice and sponsors initiatives to build healthier and safer communities.



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**A Franciscan Benediction**

May God bless us with a restless discomfort about easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships,

so that we may seek truth boldly and love deep with our hearts.

May God bless us with holy anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people,

so that we may tirelessly work for justice, freedom, and peace among all people.

May God bless us with the gift of tears to shed with those who suffer from pain, rejection, starvation, or the loss of all that they cherish,

so that we may reach out our hands to comfort them

and transform that pain to joy.

May God bless us with enough foolishness to believe that we really can make a difference in this world,

so that we are able, with God's grace, to do what others claim cannot be done.

Amen.

