

COVENANT SERVICE 2020

Phil 3:7-14

Matt 16:21-28

For our service today I decided to focus on the covenant prayer of commitment that we will make later. In that way I am hoping that we will be able to make that commitment with a greater degree of insight and meaning.

That covenant begins with the words, 'I am no longer my own but yours.' In fact, we have never really been our own, although we may like to think so. Everything we have comes from God – our life, our world, our talents and gifts, our possessions, our families. But we struggle to internalise that. We may say it with our lips, but our hearts and minds are often singing from a different hymn sheet. We talk, don't we, about, 'my body, my qualifications, my car, my house, my job, my children, my future', and so on. But none of it is mine in the truest sense; it has all been given to me. I came into the world with nothing and I leave with nothing.

If we really get hold of that truth, everything gets turned upside down. We must then consult with the real owner about how we use what He has lent us. 'Lord, help me use responsibly this body you have given me. It comes from you and is the temple of the Holy Spirit. Lord, what should I be studying with this mind you have given me so that I can do the job which will enable me to make the contribution you want me to make in the world.

'Lord, is this the car, the house, that you want for me?

Lord, help me to remember that this family that you have given me are your people, and I am answerable to you for the way I behave towards them.

Someone coined the phrase, 'The Copernican revolution of the soul'. Just as Copernicus discovered that the earth is not the centre of the universe, with the sun revolving around it, so we need to come to the realisation that God needs to be the centre of things, rather than ourselves as the centre with God on the periphery.

'I am no longer my own but yours.' That leads on very naturally to the next line that says, 'Your will, not mine be done in all things.' Because the Lord is the owner in charge of all, I need to follow His will and not mine. I need to seek His purposes and not mine; His priorities and not mine. That's what we pray for whenever we say the Lord's Prayer: 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done...' Thy will be done...not mine'.

'Your will be done wherever you may place me...' says the prayer. Wherever I may be in terms of my station in life, my stage of life, the condition of my health, my social and economic standing, my family circumstances, my work situation. That is not to say that we should not seek to change these, as long as any such change is because of God's will and not just my own desires. But, outside of that, we need to 'grow where we are planted' as someone has put it. Or in the words of the Serenity Prayer, 'Lord grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.'

'Your will be done... in all that I do and all that I may endure'...and further along in the prayer, 'when I am troubled and when I am at peace.' That's a tough one. None of us wants times of hardship and trouble. And even though God may not be the cause of such times, somehow they are part of the package which is life.

That has been the experience of believers down the ages; it was the experience of Jesus; it was the experience of Paul. One of his afflictions was his 'thorn in the flesh' as he called it. HE seeks relief from this affliction but the Lord answers with the words, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in your weakness'. Indeed the difficult times are often the times of greatest growth and of a deep awareness of God's closeness.

'Your will be done, when there is work for me and when there is none.' Often, we define ourselves by our work; we feel our work gives us a sense of worth. That is understandable, but it can lead us to overwork and

it can become an issue when we are unemployed or when we retire. Work is important but we mustn't let our work define us. We have value and worth independently of work. We are created and loved by God – that is ultimately what gives us our worth and dignity.

'Your will be done when I am valued and when I am disregarded'. As with our work, we often gauge our sense of worth by how others view us. We base our value on the degree that we feel valued or not in the eyes of others. How often don't we hear ourselves or others saying, 'What will the people think?' Let's forget the Joneses; the expectations of others. Should we not rather be asking, 'What does God think?' As the one to whom I answer ultimately, His view is what really count. Paul says to the Corinthians, 'I care very little if I am judged by you...indeed I do not even judge myself'.

'Your will be done...when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking.' It's a lot easier to accept God's will when it brings fulfilment and satisfaction to our lives. But this line reminds us that in the end it's not all about me, not all about us. Even the Apostle Paul couldn't always have felt a sense of fulfilment – as in the times when he was shipwrecked or beaten or run out of a town. David Livingstone must have had times when fulfilment was lacking. So too Mother Theresa, and many other heroes of the faith. So too with us in our responsibilities at home, at work, in the church. 'Your will be done when I find fulfilment and when it is lacking.' It's not all about me. We are called, not so much to be successful, but to be faithful.

Now, another tough one: 'When I have all things and when I have nothing.' In reply to the statement, 'Money doesn't necessarily bring happiness' one wag added, 'True. But at least you can be miserable in comfort'. Paul wrote to the Philippians, 'I have learned to be content whatever my circumstance. I know what it is to be in need, I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength'.

There is the view amongst some Christians that wealth is a sign of God's blessings and that poverty is some kind of curse or punishment from God. If that was true, we would have to consider Jesus and Paul and many others as having been cursed or punished by God. 'All those things I considered as gain I now consider as loss', said Paul. I consider everything as loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.' And the words of Jesus, 'What good will it be to gain the whole world, yet forfeit one's soul?'

The covenant prayer ends much in the way it started, 'I willingly offer all I have and am to serve you, as and when you choose.' I am reminded of the prayer of Ignatius:

'Teach me, dear Lord, to serve you as you deserve. To give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and seek for no reward, save that of knowing that I do your will.'

That should be our ultimate satisfaction – knowing that we are doing His will.

Then in the concluding paragraph of the prayer, 'Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.' That truth undergirds the whole of this prayer. In the Song of Solomon we read, 'I am my beloved's and He is mine'. We offer this prayer in the knowledge that we are deeply loved by God. He is our Father; we are His children. His desire for us is only for the best and in His will is our peace.

I close with someone's adapted version of the Covenant:

I am, as I have always been, yours, O God. As the world turns, let me find myself in the places you need me to be. As each day passes, let me find myself with the people with whom you need me to be. Set my work before me, whether easy or painful, and use it – or don't – as you need to. Lift me up or set me down, fill me or empty me, with resource or without, for I am yours. Freely and easily I give all that I am to you, O glorious and blessed God – Creator, Christ, and Holy Spirit – you are mine, and I am yours. Now. Always! So be it.