

St. Cuthbert's 30th June 2024 .

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight O Lord our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

My text this morning can be found in the Letter to the Hebrews chapter 8 at verse 8 where we read, “The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will draw up a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah.”

I am very much aware that this is a difficult, emotional service to be involved in this morning. For the last time we meet as a worshipping congregation in this beautiful building which has played such an important part in the life of those who have been members here.

I am also aware that no words of mine can take away the hurt, disappointment and maybe even anger that you might feel at this time.

However, I also believe that God is still speaking his words of encouragement in order that we might find the resolve to continue to worship and serve him as members of his Body, the Church and I don't just mean the Church of Scotland, I mean the Church in all of its branches.

There has always been the idea that you do not need to go to Church to be a Christian. And in one sense this is true because a Christian is a person who accepts Jesus as their Saviour and Lord.

The question I would ask is this, if the Church is not really all that necessary why did God deem it important to bring the Church into being? Jesus told his disciples that he would build his church and the gates of hell would never prevail against it. The New Testament makes it clear that the Church is vitally important and the role she has in the world is vitally important because the Church is the Body of Christ that means that his ministry can only continue through his body, which is the Church.

There is another important point, that is, we need to be involved with other people, whether family or friends in order for our life's experience to be enriched. The writer who said that "no man is an island" is absolutely right. John Wesley once said, "The Bible knows nothing of solitary religion." Christianity is a religion of fellowship. Following Jesus involves love, righteousness and service, and these things can only be achieved through the social relationships found in the fellowship we experience through our involvement with the faith community, the Church. So if we are to develop and grow spiritually we need to be in fellowship with God and if we are to be effective in our witness and service we need to share fellowship with each other, supporting and encouraging each other in the live of Christ's Body, the Church.

And at the very heart of our fellowship with God and with each other is worship. Worship allows us to come together under a common purpose

of praise which helps equip us for service to God and our neighbour.

And if we are to be a people of worship a people who seek to praise and serve God then nothing can take the place of being involved in the life of the Church.

This morning there is a challenge being offered to us And I would suggest that this challenge comes in the shape of a two sided question, and it is this, “How much does the Church mean to me?” or “What does it really mean to belong to the Church?”

If we could be clearer in our minds about these questions, we might begin to understand how important is our involvement in the life of the Church, as well as being confident to go and invite other people to become involved in the fellowship of faith.

What then do we mean by the Church? Well there are those who view the Church as being just another organisation, that is, it is made up of a group of people who come together because they have a common interest.

In the same way that some folk would join the golf club or bowling club because they provide the proper facilities to play golf or bowls. Or some people become involved with a political party because they share the same ideals. From this point of view, the Church is just a religious club, which people join if they are interested in religion.

Then like other interest groups, the Church will have its ups and downs, there will be times when its membership will be healthy in numbers and

times when membership will dwindle. It then could be argued that we just happen to be in a time of decline.

Then from this human point of view, why do people get involved in the Church at all? Is it because it is convenient to have a building where you can go on certain occasions. Or it is helpful to have a minister available to perform society's rites of passage, to baptise, to marry and to bury.

Although it has to be said that in an increasingly humanist, secular society there is less demands made for the services of the Church.

Yet it is convenient to have some institution that stands for God in society, whether there is a strong belief in him or not. It's just handy for the Church to be there just in case folk might need its services.

There is the story told of the woman who handed over her 'lines' to the minister when she came to church for the first time and said, "I always hand them in; for ye never ken when ye might need a minister."

This may be a common attitude, but it is very far from being the real truth about the Church. If that were all that the Church meant, why would we bother being her this morning. But we know that there is much more to the Church than just social convenience. The Church's existence is tied up with the idea of Covenant. And of course this comes from the Bible.

We divide the Bible into two sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, and the word Testament means Covenant.

And Covenant means an agreement, a very special, solemn kind of

agreement. Indeed the idea of Covenant is rooted in Scottish history. I'm sure all of us have heard of the Covenanters. In the time of Charles the First a large group of people signed their names to a 'solemn oath and covenant' pledging that they would do everything in their power to maintain a true biblical Christianity in Scotland.

They called it a covenant because they believed they were pledging their loyalty, not to men, but to God. Because of their loyalty to this covenant many were driven out of their kirks and held conventicles on the moors. They were hunted down by the government troops and thousands were imprisoned, tortured and killed for their faith, they endured these things because they had made this solemn promise in the presence of God and with God.

"The days are coming, says the Lord, when I will draw up a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah."

Covenant was at the very heart of the Jewish faith. They were made aware of a special agreement made between them and God. This meant that they had been called into an intimate family relationship with God, they received the promise of his help and guidance, and they accepted his demands on them, recognising themselves to be 'God's chosen people.'

In the book of Exodus, Moses says, "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb' and immediately after the making of the covenant there followed the Ten Commandments which began "I am the Lord your

God.” On the one side, God promised to guide, liberate and preserve his people. And on the other side, the people of Israel promised to worship him and obey his laws.

This is what the whole of the Old Testament is about. It sets out to show the faithfulness and reliability of God in his dealings with his people, and it also records time and again their failure to keep their side of the agreement. Often they would fall away from the ways God had set out for them. Then God sent his prophets, like Elijah, Amos and Isaiah, to call them back to their unique mission as God’s people, and to interpret the events of history as God’s dealings with them. They witnessed to a just and merciful God who required mercy and justice from his people in their dealings with others. The Jewish people became the people of the Old Covenant. Their religion has made them what they are.

What has all this got to do with us as in Church this morning?

For an answer we turn to the second part of the Bible, which we call the New Testament, or the New Covenant. Here we find the same fundamental elements laid down for the Christians as applied to the people of Israel. As followers of Jesus we have been called into a special intimate relationship with God whom we have the privilege of calling ‘Father.’ We believe that he is guiding us and caring for us and seeks our highest good, and that he is totally dependable. Also God places the same demands upon us, he calls us to worship and obey him.

And here we discover what the Church really is, it is the community of all those who pledge to worship and serve God as we have come to know him in Jesus Christ, because it is through Jesus that he has delivered us from the power and of sin and death.

So what is New about this Covenant? The Old Covenant was based on Law, but the Law was broken so often that people began to despair of ever being able to please God by keeping it perfectly. They yearned for some more inward kind of faith, and Jeremiah saw it coming, “Behold, I will make a New Covenant.” The New Testament is the joyful declaration that this new Covenant is here. It came with Jesus, and it is the foundation of the Church.

This means, that belonging to the Church enables us to enter into a new and special relationship with God through Christ. What is new about it? Well it tells us that our relationship with God does not depend on us being faithful to him, it depends on us accepting the forgiving grace of God revealed in Jesus. The Church does not say, ‘Be good...or else!’ What it says is ‘ God has accepted you in Christ, so out of gratitude let his goodness be formed in you.’ The Church is a community of trust, trust in God who offers us forgiveness, who accepts us, and whose love will never let us go. We are also to trust each other as members of his family, we are made brothers and sisters in Christ, loving and supporting

one another for his sake. The Church is not a closed community, it is open to all who believe in and accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. The Church is a community of the Spirit, where we ask the Spirit of Jesus to come and change us and fill us with his power. We don't come to Church merely to be reminded of God's laws and our failure to keep them. We come to Church that we might hear and receive God's word of forgiveness for all that is wrong in our lives, to be recreated as new people, to be filled with the infectious love of Jesus, which makes doing God's will not a burden but a joy. In the Church we are not just sinners, we are forgiven sinners, and there's a world of a difference.

Belonging to the Church is about entering into a new and living relationship with God, a relationship where we receive his love, his forgiveness and his re-creating power, and in glad response we give to him our joyful worship and obedience.

May we fully realise what a privilege it is to belong to Jesus and his Church!

Let us pray:- Lord God, you have called us to be your people. Through grace you have welcomed us into the family of Christ's Church. Help us to be true to our calling as members of the Church that through our worship, witness and service others may come to know of your love for them, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

