



WORSHIP

Bible notes

We draw closer to our annual remembrance of the last week of Jesus' life. We think particularly of how, in obedience to God, he was willing to undergo terrible suffering to establish the new covenant of God's love. There was no other way.

Jeremiah 31.31-34 (For Worship only)

Jeremiah's ministry was around 627-586 BC. He called the people of Judah to turn from their sins and re-engage in a life faithful to the God of promise.

This profound passage is full of meaning for our understanding of the new covenant (the only time this phrase is used in the Old Testament) to be made between God and his people through Jesus (Hebrews 8.6). The new covenant is compared with the old covenant established at the time of the Exodus. The old covenant was based on the law (the Ten Commandments), but the new covenant would affect people more deeply. Instead of being written on stone (Exodus 31.18), it would be written on people's hearts. There is nothing cold or external about it; it is not to do with a tick box morality (have I committed this or that sin this week?). It is about a transformed condition of the human heart. Here people will find a new – personal – relationship with God which will renew their minds. In the New Testament we see how this new relationship is based on God's love.

This new covenant will be offered to everyone. We are reminded of the overarching plan to life, often hidden from us. Sometimes we are called to make what seems an insignificant contribution to the developing covenant relationship with God. We must be content with this, though we cannot see either the fruit of our labours or the completion of the plan. Jeremiah's voice was heard by the people of Judah; since then it has been heard by many generations faithful to the covenant promise. Wherever it is heard, no faithful reaction can be regarded as insignificant, unworthy or unproductive.

Psalm 51.1-12

This was written by King David following the prophet Nathan's visit to rebuke him for having committed adultery with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11.2-12.14).

The first words, 'Have mercy on me', suggest that David now depends completely on God's grace for forgiveness. He cannot earn it, nor does he deserve it. What is more, he sees his sin less as his offence against other human beings and more as his offence against God. He understands there is an eternal significance to his life that belongs ultimately to God. A king of Israel was a powerful figure and nothing would have been easier than for David to make himself the divine authority for his people. He has not forgotten, however, that he is God's servant and answerable to him, as are we all both great and small.

Hebrews 5. 5-10

The author of this letter emphasises Jesus' unique position and the nature of his ministry. Here he shows that Jesus was appointed by God. Jesus' prayers were heard in particular because he submitted himself to God. He did not allow suffering to divert him from God's plan, nor did he let it make him resentful or bitter. Instead, because he learned obedience through suffering, God was able to fulfil his plan. The word 'perfect' here means 'fulfilling the purpose of one's life' rather than faultless. So Jesus became the source of salvation for the world. We are left wondering what would have happened if Jesus had not been so obedient to his Father's will.

Melchizedek was king and priest of Salem, now called Jerusalem (Genesis 14.18-20).

John 12.20-33

(for both magazines)



We see Jesus' obedience here. He admits it would be wrong to ask his Father to save him from the cross. He would be ending God's plan, central to the fulfilment of God's promise to the world. Twice we are told this kind of obedience brings glory to God (vv. 23-28).

The saying concerning the grain of wheat (falling to the ground and dying if it is to bear fruit) shows Jesus had to die. By his death God's power over evil and constancy of love is revealed, despite the worst that humans can do. God also shows that the gift of eternal life is stronger than any kind of death we might have to endure. Jesus warns us that something similar is true for anyone who would become his disciple. The more you try to take control of your life, the more likely you are to lose it. Those who follow Christ must follow wherever he may lead, even to the point of death. But the lives of these good and faithful souls, God will honour.

In the New Testament it is clear that death is the consequence of sin (Romans 5.12 ff.). In order to save humanity from the death caused by its godlessness, Christ takes it all on himself on the cross so the consequence is not death but life in him. Where there should be death, Christ brings life. Like David, we depend upon God's grace to receive the forgiveness we need. By grace – 'God doing it for us' – we are granted undeserved forgiveness and God restores us to communion with him. Just as the establishment of the covenant has always been at God's initiative, so when the promise is broken, restoration is always by God's grace. As we contemplate Christ's passion we cannot avoid being caught up in the glory of God's love.

These same Bible passages were covered in Roots Issue 4 (March/April 2003). Some of the material produced around the Gospel passage may be found on the web site www.rootsontheweb.com under the date: 6 April, 2003. Notes on Psalm 119.9-16 may also be found on the web site.



Set the scene

Display around the worship area pictures of conflicts, local and international, or of ways in which we make promises (see *Be creative*).

Produce a Powerpoint® or other presentation of young people's 'prophetic' activity or a vox pop of issues (such as child protection guidelines).

Distribute threads for covenant friendship bracelets and before the service begins, demonstrate how to make them (See *Be creative*).

Call to worship

The Lord God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, is our creator.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

The Lord is our promise.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

The Lord is our judgement.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

The Lord is our hope.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

The Lord is our peace.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

The Lord is our salvation.

We worship the Lord, the giver of life.

Let us worship the Lord, our God.

Let us worship the Lord, the giver of life, our God.



Pray

A prayer of confession

Gracious God,
in coming to worship, we know you welcome us,

yet we come to you, uncertain of our identity

as your people, but sure of our sins.

O God, forgive us and remember our sins no more.

We come to you unworthy of the grace we have received in your Son, Jesus Christ.

O God, forgive us and remember our sins no more.

We come to you unreliably as we fail in our promises to listen to or faithfully follow your call.

O God, forgive us and remember our sins no more.

We come to you ungrateful for the gifts of love, forgiveness and life we have received time without measure.

O God, forgive us and remember our sins no more.

Thanks be to you, for you are our God, the Lord, the giver of life, calling us as one people under one baptism into one faith, who offers merciful forgiveness and restores us into life-giving relationships with you, all creation and one another.

Amen.

A prayer of thanksgiving

Eternal God,
your prophet proclaimed the days would come when your covenant love would be written on our hearts. For the days that are here, and the days that are past, we worship and adore you, O God, because

you have placed within our hearts the covenant love of a mighty God, gracious Father, Lord of lords, King of kings.

As we reflect on our lives before you, we can trace your promised presence, prompting presence and protecting presence. It is because of this that we know your faithfulness, mercy, grace and life. We give you thanks for these things. And yet, O God, our thanksgiving is not just for what we have received in the past, but because we know you are present with us today and will be into the future when we are finally welcomed into your eternal kingdom with Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

A prayer of commitment

There was a day when God took our hand, but we pulled away preferring another's. We know there is true life in no other; we have confessed our failings. His hand remains steadily available to us. In faith, our relationship with God, each other and the world has been restored. Let us, therefore, take one another's hand, knowing we are held by him as we journey in hope together with a new song in our hearts.

He puts his law of love within us.

He writes it on our hearts.

He is our God.

He forgives our iniquities.

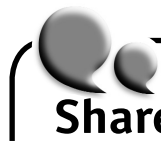
He remembers our sin no more.

Thanks be to God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
world without end.

Amen.

There are more prayers on the web site
www.rootsontheweb.com

'I will be their God and they shall be my people.'



Share the word

Each of these alternative reflections is based on one of today's key Bible passages.

Take his hand

Jeremiah 31.31-34

- Jeremiah was a faithful prophet called by God in his youth. What was important, however, was not his age but his willingness to be faithful to God's call. We see him proclaiming God's word of judgement and salvation in a context of division and conflict between the kingdoms of Israel and Judah that originated during the period following the death of Solomon (2 Chronicles 10). What is a prophet? How do we recognise prophets?
- Here God points the adversaries to look into the future together. In mediation, it is important to reframe the situation so that we do not continually come back to establishing the other's guilt. The task is to agree a future outcome that enables the parties to live together, ideally in peace, but at least without violence. God expresses his concern for peace to both parties in the conflict and offers a new promise based on a relationship of love and peace rather than of judgement and guilt. Why does conflict happen? What conflicts have marked our personal or congregational life? How does this affect my daily life?
- The core relationship of trust was signified in the wedding promise (v. 32). Reflect on the powerful image of God taking our hands and promising himself, the whole of himself, to us. His hand is a symbol of belonging, acceptance, trust, strength, security, identity, love – we have it all! The Judeans may have broken their promise, but do we break it now?
- 'This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after those days' (v. 33). Why especially identify Israel

here? Was it recognised as the one with most broken promises, who had followed its idols and walked furthest from God? Note how God deals with the wayward. The covenant is changed from one of stone and law to one of heart and love. Rather than getting bogged down in past failings, God offers a new future. What does this mean for our relationships broken by conflict?

- Reflect on the 'I will' promises in the passage culminating in the unbelievable (I will put my Law within them; I will write it on their hearts; I will be their God; I will forgive their iniquity; I will remember their sin no more). No matter what my iniquity, God not only draws me to himself again but will forget the harm I have done him. Is this not the ultimate test of love's gracious strength? What can we learn from this for the way we engage in our relationships in faith? What a promise! What a revelation!

The hour has come

John 12.20-33

- The people of Israel celebrated three major religious festivals during the year (Exodus 23.14-17; Leviticus 23 – Passover/Unleavened Bread, Pentecost/Harvest, Tabernacles/Day of Atonement). How much is our Christian faith known for joy and celebration? What sense of celebration do people experience in church?
- In the heaving maelstrom of the Passover crowd, outsiders appear. We are simply informed they were 'Greeks'. Educated and respectful, but outsiders and Gentiles, with no place in the festival and perhaps in the eyes of some, no reason to be there. Who they were – we don't know. Why they wanted to see Jesus – we don't know. All we know is they wanted to see him. When do our celebrations draw people in to enquire about our faith? How open are we to those outside? What welcome do we give them? What characteristics of our

lives would allow someone to recognise us in the crowd as those who belong to Jesus?

- The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified (v. 23). It is easy to imagine the disciples hearing these words and thinking the kingdom is at hand; an earthly kingdom of power and authority. The people are calling for him and the Gentiles wish to see him. Is it unfair to imagine that, in the coming kingdom, the disciples also see themselves receiving their glory? What rewards do we expect to receive through following Jesus? Who would not be forgiven for believing this glory was one of strength and might?
- The disciples' daydreaming ends abruptly when Jesus begins to speak, not of life and power, but loss and death. This becomes the acid test of faith. Apart from the ultimate experience of our personal physical death, what lesser deaths are we called to experience in our faith journey? However, the issue here is not about death, but about life. This is the paradox – the way to life is through death. Life is dependent on change, letting go and loss. Henri Nouwen (see *Resources*) challenges us with his meditation on this passage: how can I die in such a way that it brings most fruit to the world; the church; the community; myself?
- Verse 27 contains dark and poignant words. The human, broken Jesus opens his heart. Is this the Jesus we would wish to show? Who needs to see this Jesus? All who are dealing with the impact of change, loss and death, all who do not know how to respond to the difficulties experienced in life, all who need to know Jesus was there before, still is here with us today and will continue to be with us tomorrow. Who needs to see this Jesus? The world; the church; the broken – we all need to. Verse 28 is the ultimate prayer of faith, hope and love. Dare we repeat it?



Be creative

Choose from this range of ideas to help develop thinking around today's Bible passages. Those in italics are particularly suitable when children are present.

Take his hand

- What is a prophet? Place newspapers or magazines in the seats for people to browse. What examples of prophets can we find in politics, economics, the environment, the Church? Cut them out and display around the church.
- Draw up a CV for a prophet. Include: birth, age, education, qualifications, professional experience, other relevant experience, qualities, criminal declaration form.
- *Survey your children and young people about what they consider to be the three main issues of God's concern. The world? The environment? The Church? The local community? This should provide helpful information for developing programmes during the coming months. Discuss how to draw the young people in to contribute to or develop reflection groups that explore these issues in more depth. Might they make 'a report' to the congregation and leadership, recommending ways in which the church could be further involved? Could they develop liturgies? Could they hold a conference and invite other churches and/or youth groups as well as interested stakeholders to participate?*
- Could you imagine your church being recognised as a prophetic church in your community? Is this desirable? How might you make it a reality? What space do we give for our 'prophets' to confront us with God's word? What might be the consequences?

The hour has come

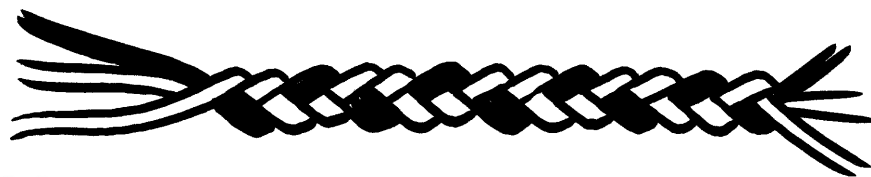
- *List the number of ways we make promises – crossing our heart, shaking hands, 'blood-brothers', exchanging rings, raising hand in salute, holding badge on (football/rugby) shirt,*

singing anthems, exchanging contracts ... Why do we make promises? Do promises come with different levels of expectation of fulfilment? What makes them different? What is important about ritual? What is important about the ritual of promise for us?

- Reflect, in silence, on a promise to others, God or myself that I didn't keep. What happened? How do we feel? What would we like to do about it? Can we start again with a promise ritual? Who needs to know about this to help it become real?
- Develop a church covenant – let it be a promise statement of faith, the priority values and mission of your church, how you will relate to God, the world and others. When complete, print it on every order of service, make prayer cards with its inclusion for the congregation, put it

on a poster placed on the front door; include it on calling cards and invitations to special services, events and so on.

- *Make covenant friendship bracelets together. Use three pieces of thread or string to symbolise any of the following: God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; Faith, hope and love; Gold, frankincense and myrrh; God, the Church and me; Yesterday, today and tomorrow.*
- *Describe examples to show the possibility of 'no longer remembering', such as a slate to wipe it clean, a floppy disc which can be reformatted, a wax tablet which can be heated and reset; or writing letters in the sand and watching when the tide comes in and goes back out.*



Resources

Hymns in italics are particularly suitable when all ages worship together.

As we break the bread (HON, HTC, RS)
Before the fruit is ripened by the sun
(*Borrowed Light*, OUP, 1999)
Broken for me, broken for you (CP, HON, HTC, ICF, MP, SF, TS)
Father we love you, we worship and adore you (BPW, HON, ICF, MP, SF, TS)
Grant to us, O Lord, a heart renewed (LAU)
Let us break bread together on our knees (AMNS, HON, MP)
My Jesus, my Saviour (HON, MP, TS)
On the blood-stained ground (TS2)
Open our eyes, Lord, we want to see Jesus (BPW, HON, MP, SF)
Songs of thankfulness and praise (AMNS, CP, HON, ICF, LAU, NEH, RS)
The greatest thing in all my life (MP)

Widely available

And now, O Father, mindful of the love
Crown him with many crowns
Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father
I heard the voice of Jesus say
Nearer, my God, to thee
Now the green blade rises from the buried grain
O Jesus, I have promised
Praise to the holiest in the height

Henri Nouwen, *Our Greatest Gift: a Meditation on Dying and Coping*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1995, ISBN 0060663553.

World Council of Churches, *Decade to Overcome Violence*:

www.overcomingviolence.org

Relate:www.relate.org.uk

Conflict Resolution Network UK:
www.conflictresolutionnetwork.org.uk