

## Planning

### LECTIONARY

Jeremiah 31.31-34, Psalm 51.1-12 or Psalm 119.9-16, Hebrews 5.5-10, John 12.20-33.

### Context

Jeremiah writes to the Israelites exiled in Babylon, who have believed that they could only worship in Jerusalem, telling them their exile will last 70 years but they can both worship and integrate with society, because God is sovereign.

### Common thread – Heart of the covenant (Jeremiah 31.31-34)

This week the ROOTS resources look at what is, perhaps, the most important single Old Testament event, the establishment of the New Covenant – a new relationship with his people which God creates and promises to sustain. *An alternative thread, for adults, offers the opportunity to explore something of what the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has to say about what Jesus portrays of God and how our lives should reflect that.*

### Seasonal

Theological reflection p.2; Prayers p.3; All-age service outlines (Mothering Sunday and Good Friday) pp.4-5.

The *Children & Young People* magazine provides a *Way through Lent* through the colours of the rainbow.

And don't forget the *Study resources for Lent, The way of justice and discipleship* provided in the January/February issue of ROOTS.

### PLUS

**Hymns and songs** See opposite page.

**Fast response** [WEB](#) Reflection linking recent events to these readings, posted on the website on 27.03.2009.

**Take-home sheet** [WEB](#) Downloadable activities for parents and children.

**ROOTS resources** Look at *ROOTS Children & Young People* magazine for further ideas.

**Archive** [WEB](#) These readings were covered on 06.04.2003 and 02.04.2006.

**Books** *The Celtic Resource Book*, Martin Wallace Full details: [WEB](#).

# HEART OF THE COVENANT

## Gather

### Prepare the space

Make available heart-shaped pieces of paper and pens. Some pieces may have messages of love and greeting already written on them. Some worshippers may want to write a greeting themselves and offer their 'heart of love' to someone they do not know in the congregation. Children may be offered heart-shaped lollies or love-heart sweets (though check that the messages are suitable).

### Alternative thread –

#### That which portrays God

Provide pictures of people in uniforms or recognised modes of dress and ask worshippers to reflect upon what they represent and how you would know if they are worthy representatives.

### Gathering words

We are loved by God; all are loved by God. This is an eternal truth, revealed by Jeremiah, fulfilled by Jesus and celebrated by us today.

### Call to worship

Night has gone, day has broken.

**Thanks be to God.**

We are loved as the people we are.

**Thanks be to God.**

With hearts aflame with love

**we praise the Lord.**

## Prayer

### A prayer of approach

O Lord of exile and of home;  
O Christ of challenge and of comfort;  
O Spirit of truth and of justice:  
**we worship you with love and affection.**

There is no place to which we go that you are not.

There is neither noise nor clamour that can drown the sound of your call.

There are no events past, present or future which call in question your invitation.

**We worship you with confidence born of experience.**

Lord Jesus Christ, you hold out your hands to us:

hands which heal, restore and renew us;

hands which invite us to place ours in yours

and follow;

hands that embrace and enfold us.

**We worship you in the security of your firm grasp of us.**

Holy Spirit of God, unfailingly you support us, leading us day by day towards your truth.

Fill our hearts that we may share your love.

**We worship you with enthusiasm.**

**Amen.**

### A prayer of confession

Lord our God,

you know who we are and how we are.

Our strengths and weaknesses are known to you.

Forgive our failure to hear and respond.

Forgive our unwillingness to trust your promises.

Let us know the healing touch of your forgiveness,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

**Amen.**

### A Celtic-style blessing

May God, who knows where you are, help you on the journey.

May Jesus, who has walked before you, guide your steps.

May the Spirit, who embraces the wanderer, nourish you as you travel.

And may the Father, Son and Holy Spirit await your arrival with joy and love.

**Amen.**

### A sending out prayer

Go into the world, knowing that God is with you.

Go into the world with the peace of Christ upon you.

Go into the world with the blessing of the Holy Spirit.

And may the blessing of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit

rest upon and remain with us,

this day and ever more.

**Amen.**

### Ways into prayer

Listen, watch or read the news each day in the coming week and reflect on all who are exiled. Though they are removed from their securities, God is with them. Use their example to explore the wonder of God's love.

**Prayers of intercession, a personal prayer for the week and further prayers are on the [WEB](#).**

## Bible notes

**Keeping the covenant is at heart a matter of interior intention and sincerity rather than slavish public attention to rules.**

### The links between the lectionary readings

The link is the notion of doing what is right as the really genuine response to God's covenant with humankind. Jeremiah anticipates the making of a new covenant between God and Israel in which the divine law would be written on human hearts. Psalm 119 also speaks of the interiority of God's word, in this case as a statement of moral intention. There's an interesting dialectic between Old and New Testament readings today. The prophet and psalmist speak of the interiorisation of what was external; Hebrews and John of the earthly manifestation of the Son from heaven. The focus of the Gospel is that the advent of the divine Son marks a moment of crisis or judgement for the world. How one responds to Jesus is made the criterion of one's own standing before God. We have met this theme in the Gospels already.

### Old Testament Jeremiah 31.31-34

This well-known passage is rightly regarded as one of the most important in the Hebrew Bible, containing the fourth and future covenant. In reality, this represents a variation on a theme. God is not a perpetual legislator but a God concerned to continue in covenant relationship with his people. Thus Jeremiah is not criticising the earlier covenants, though he does by implication comment drily on the failure of people within Israel to keep to the covenant. There is a distinct moral development evidenced here. Jeremiah focuses more on personal obedience and self-understanding, with a greater interest in individual responsibility, and less on the external manifestation of the covenant. This is accompanied by optimism that, when the time is right, people will want to obey the covenant as their dutiful response to God. This purple passage probably inspired Jesus and later Christian writers.

### Psalm 119.9-16

The psalmist also speaks of the interiority of God's word. He doesn't just address young men, or even young women! It is a moving and skilful meditation of what it means to live the life of prayer in which reflection on God and the spiritual life determines an entire perspective. There is much to be learned here. The goal of a Christian life is a life formed and determined by prayer. That is the sign of a genuinely holy person. Be warned, however, of the dangers of preoccupation with your own internal self. There is a thin dividing line between genuine interiority and self-delusional fantasy. The only way of avoiding such overlap – *genuinely* the only way – is to be under spiritual direction so that your own thoughts and prayers are shared objectively with others and a critical evaluation made of them. Psalm 119 is a pioneering model.

### New Testament Hebrews 5.5-10

The one who demonstrates covenant obedience most clearly is Jesus himself. Jesus lived the perfect life of communion with God because, in Christian theological terms, he was God incarnate. The real value of Hebrews is that it tends towards a doctrine of the incarnation (something that achieved classical expression only later than the New Testament period) but retains a realistic awareness of Jesus as a real human being who serves in this sense as the model for spiritual development. Jesus learned through human experience; he did not just achieve it in isolation from others or by circumventing difficulty.

All of us have difficulties in our lives. There's a real temptation to imagine we'll be able to do better spiritually once we have cleared the various thickets that seem to lie in our way. This is a great myth which a personal devil, if there is such a being, is glad to promote. We don't find God after we have cleared away difficulty; we find God *in the midst* of the difficulty, just as Jesus did. Difficulties are therefore opportunities rather than obstacles. Today's readings are full of meaning for those who would make progress in their spiritual lives.

### Gospel John 12.20-33

Finally, we turn again to John's Gospel. We have seen that John puts a theological interpretation on the ministry of Jesus, hinting at his descent from heaven (3.13) and future return to heaven (6.62). Jesus predicts his death with confidence in John, commenting also on its saving significance. In this passage – which in tandem with John 17 replaces the Last Supper in John – the Evangelist makes Jesus the universal Saviour who embodies God's presence and draws all people to him.

It may be difficult to reconcile the Christ of the Fourth Gospel with his presentation in the Synoptic Gospels. Don't be alarmed at the differences. None of the Gospels gives us a contemporary eye-witness account of Jesus. All the evangelists were theologians and interpreters of the story of Jesus. The basic message of this passage is easy to ascertain. It is that Jesus' death has saving significance; and that, in following God's will to the last, he calls his followers to a path of suffering service.

### Hymns and songs

Songs in italics are suitable for all ages

A debtor to mercy alone (HTC)

Glory be to Jesus

I cannot tell how he whom angels worship

It is a thing most wonderful

*Lift high the cross*

My Lord, what love is this

My song is love unknown

O my Saviour, lifted (AMNS, HON, ICF, MP, SOF)

Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle

*Stay with us (Taizé) (BPW, RS)*

Such love, pure as the whitest snow

(HON, MP, SG, SOF, TS)

*Take, O take me as I am (CH4, SG, WGWG)*

*There is a Redeemer (CH4, HON, ICF, MP, SG, SOF, TS)*

*Will you come and follow me*

Book abbreviations are inside the front cover and further publication details on the [WEB](#).

## WORD &amp; RESPONSE ADULTS

**Heart of the covenant**  
Jeremiah 31.31-34

Jeremiah makes a breakthrough in Israel's understanding of God. This is not another old covenant, it is the new covenant, which, unknown to Jeremiah, will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

- This covenant was addressed to Jewish exiles in Babylon. There was no hope of an early return to Jerusalem. They were told to stay in the land, work and pray for its welfare, but they were given the assurance God was with them.
- It is helpful to reflect upon exiles today. Some have come to this country to escape persecution, some to enrich their life. There are people who have been offered education and wish to stay on, others have sought refuge, or healing. However they have come, this is a strange land, with strange cultural expression, little religious activity and a pretty greedy and grasping population. There are other exiles to be considered: people have grown within this society who do not own its values or expressions, who find themselves strangers in their own country. They have no place to which they can go, but yearn for the security of the past. There is a third group of exiles: men and women who have held the faith, who have wrapped it and protected it, bound it with tradition and law, to such a degree that grace is excluded, as are those men and women who need its gentle touch.
- This New Covenant of Jeremiah embraces all exiles, because it embraces all of humanity. Its words are so clear and powerful: 'You will be my people and I will be your God'. Our identities are bound together, God's in us and ours in God's. And these identities are open. There is nothing allowed to darken or to sully the relationship because God has chosen to relieve us of having to 'match up'.
- Another strand can be explored: that God will write his law on people's hearts. Teaching will not be necessary, people will, by virtue of their birth, know God and God's ways. The implications of this for the Church in the midst of this period of change are immense and exciting. They are also very challenging, as they invite us to look at our traditions, but does God not do this in every generation?

- This understanding has implications for our life together. Will our children discern our faith from being with us? Will they, from their place in our community, know God? Can we love them into knowing rather than feeling that we must teach them?
- As we progress towards Easter this New Covenant puts the journey of Jesus into perspective. Here is a man who gives himself for others that he might find himself in God. It is not simply a matter that he does it for us, rather we are invited to embrace and be embraced by this new relationship and find our place in the providence of God.

**Another angle**

In present day British society, where children are constantly subject to testing and told that their future will stand or fall on exam results, is the possibility of teaching about grace seriously hampered?

**Living faith**

**For discussion:** What are the challenges and dangers of the New Covenant? How can we live our lives in the complete loving freedom which God gives and how can we encourage others to grasp the hand of eternal life which is held out to them?

**Alternative thread**  
**That which portrays God**  
Hebrews 5.5-10

**What is the distinctive nature of Jesus and how can we grow to be more like him?**

- The author of Hebrews draws a very clear distinction between the appointment of Melchizedek and that of Jesus. The former is appointed by men, the latter is appointed by God. In a sense, therefore, we are invited to compare them and to discover the distinctive nature of Jesus: that which portrays God.
- It is helpful as we move nearer to Easter to look at ourselves and make similar comparisons. The nature of our calling, the commitment of our service, the relationship we enjoy with God. Perhaps we have to have the Easter courage of allowing the 'crowd' to join in the comparison; how do others see us? That which portrays God?

- What are the substantive differences between Jesus and ourselves? We are both rooted in and created by God. His life is one of perfect obedience; his obedience through suffering even to death, brings hope for all. What of our lives as disciples, how obedient are we? Will we endure suffering for the sake of the kingdom, what hope will others see reflected in our living?

■ Jesus had the faith to enter his ministry knowing it would cost all he had to give, but only by so giving could he enter into the immeasurable fullness of God, and establish God's kingdom for men and women. What offering do we make as we journey towards Easter? Does the suffering of Jesus help us understand the magnanimity of God's New Covenant?

- If the Church is the 'body of Christ' does that not mean we have to live for the world as he did? The challenge of Easter is not simply to remember but to participate in his self-giving love. Not only do we worship one who has given us a pattern, we believe and practise that pattern in our own lives for the well-being of others.

**Living faith**

**For discussion:** Can we identify ways in which we give our own lives for the world? Is it realistic to demand this of ordinary people?

# WORD & RESPONSE ALL AGES TOGETHER

## Heart of the covenant Jeremiah 31.31-34

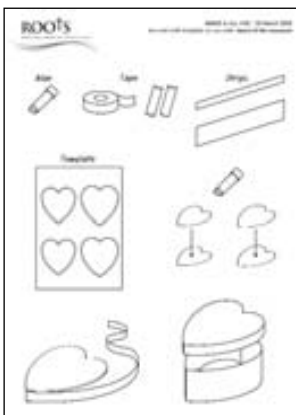
### Open and Explore the Word

Jeremiah 29 constitutes a letter sent to the exiles in Babylon and describes very vividly the circumstances in which they were living. There is an edited version of this on the [WEB](#). Use it to provide an all important context for Jeremiah 31.31-34.

- Ask people to imagine that they are refugees yearning to go home. Make a list of all the things they take for granted at home that they would miss. People can do this alone or in groups, as appropriate.
- Remind people that the refugees were afraid to worship because the Law of Deuteronomy said they could only worship in Jerusalem. Ask people to make a list of the important aspects of worship and how it impacts on our lives.
- Invite someone to read the version of Jeremiah's letter to the exiles telling them that they will stay there for seventy years and you will enter into all aspects of the foreign life, both working and praying for the good of that nation. Remember God is sovereign of the whole world.
- Then read the passage: Jeremiah 31.31-34. Invite people to write or share response as a refugee to it. Is it delight, a relief? What will be the consequences?

### Respond to the Word

**Reflect:** Study the inter-twining and un-brokenness of the pattern on a Celtic cross or ring. The Celts had a wonderful gift of expressing symbols of eternity in design. We can grow and develop in any aspect of living knowing that love will never part from us. How do we grow into it? Share ideas. *You will need:* a Celtic cross or a piece of eternal Celtic interweaving, e.g. on a ring. *The Celtic Resource Book* by Martin Wallace would be helpful (see *Planning*).



**Trace:** A simple flow chart might be made along the lines of a Celtic pattern on which people can mark points of our awareness of God's love: parents, a gift from friends, a helping hand which was offered, an encouraging letter, all point us to the Creator's love manifested through each other. This might make a good follow-on activity to *Reflect* (above).

**Role play:** The drama of Chapter 29 lends itself to role play. Create a conversation which communicates the information in Jeremiah 29.

**Make:** Make heart-shaped boxes (for template see [WEB](#)). Put heart-shaped biscuits or sweets inside them together with words from Jeremiah 31.33-34 and give them to people who may welcome these words and a small gift.

**Discuss:** Do these readings have any meaning or us today, or can they have relevance for other people? Might they inspire us to help others? Discuss these points and feed back to the whole group.

**Pray:** This is one of the most powerful parts of the whole Bible. Read it quietly and alone and offer a prayer of thanks, gratitude, promise, whatever you feel like.

**Pray:** Continue to offer an area where people can be quiet, with chairs and cushions to make it comfortable and maybe candles as well. Provide Bibles, hymn books and prayer books as resources for reflection and invite people to reflect on God's faithfulness to us and our own response. This week provide Celtic patterns to reflect on.

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**Don't forget the Take-home sheet** [WEB](#)  
 which has activities for parents and children to do together.  
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### A prayer for all ages together

Lord God,  
 how can we praise you?  
 How can we know you?  
 Yet you gave us Jesus Christ  
 to show us what you are like  
 and how to love.

Teach us again your message of love and  
 if we ever doubt,  
 lift our eyes to Jesus.  
 Remind us that  
 in the symbol of his cross  
 your love touches and teaches us,  
 our families,  
 our friends,  
 and through us, many more.  
 For Jesus' sake.  
 Amen.

