

Josh 8:30-35  
Tim Anderson 15/11/20

I would have been about 10 years old.  
It all seemed a bit strange to me.  
My mother bought herself or made herself,  
I can't remember which,  
a white dress like a wedding dress.  
My sisters were dressed up like bridesmaids.  
My brother and I were dressed in our Sunday best.  
Had had to put on a shirt and tie.  
It might have been the only time in my childhood I saw him wear a tie.  
It was a marriage renewal of vows.  
And we all went to a beauty spot outside Apollo Bay  
and had some photos taken.  
As a ten year old boy, it just seemed weird.  
And the whole dressing up bit seemed entirely unnecessary.  
But it was Mum's way of marking her marriage out as special.  
Not sure that Dad had much of an active hand in the planning of it.  
But for Mum, her marriage was important  
and she wanted a celebration of that.  
As an adult, I can connect the dots.  
My parents' loving and faithful marriage  
meant my stable and anxiety free childhood.  
It wasn't about celebrating a ceremony that happened before I was born  
and couldn't really connect with.  
It was about celebrating God's faithfulness and my parents' faithfulness  
to the promises that had been made all those years earlier.  
And the blessing of God on that relationship.

It the Bible's terms, marriage is a covenant.  
It's an agreement between two parties to be faithful to one another.  
It's the covenant that we see most often in our society.  
But you could look around and see other covenants.  
Next year marks the 70th anniversary of the ANZUS treaty.

This was an alliance between Australia, NZ and the US.  
Each pledged to assist the other  
in case of military aggression against them.  
In the Bible's terms, it's a covenant.  
And our PM is inviting to the new US President  
to come to Australia to mark the 70th anniversary.  
You could call that a covenant renewal ceremony.

Well that's what we have in our reading from Joshua today.  
It's a ceremony to renew the covenant between God and his people.  
This is a covenant that God first established with Abraham,  
it was restated to Isaac and Jacob.  
But the formal written covenant was established with Moses.  
God promised to bring his people into the Promised Land.  
And the expectations that he placed on his people  
were written down, first of all in the 10 commandments,  
but also in the whole written Law  
that Moses received from God and wrote down for the people.  
That was the shape of Israel's response to God's promises.  
God promised to bless them.  
For their part, they needed to live by God's Law  
in order to continue to receive his blessing.

It's actually no different to our ANZUS treaty with the US.  
They promise to come to our aid in a military conflict.  
But there is a cost.  
We have to purchase defence equipment from them  
so that our military systems can operate together.  
The promise comes with an expectation  
of certain behaviour on our part.  
God's promise to be with his people  
comes with an expectation of certain behaviour on their part.  
That is the Law given on Mt Sinai.  
The ten commandments  
and the written Law of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy.

Now interestingly,  
 contained in that Law is the command to renew the covenant.  
 Moses knew  
 that he would never make it into the Promised Land himself.  
 But he gave detailed instructions  
 about how the covenant was to be renewed  
 when Israel finally made it across the Jordan.  
 What we have in our reading today,  
 is the record of Joshua  
 doing everything Moses commanded the people to do.

To underline the point,  
 I'm going to read you Moses' instructions to the people from Deut 27.  
 Just so that you can see  
 that what Joshua does is not something that he made up himself,  
 he's following the script that Moses had written for him.  
 So this is Deut 27.

"Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people:

“Keep all these commands that I give you today.

<sup>2</sup> When you have crossed the Jordan  
 into the land the Lord your God is giving you,  
 set up some large stones and coat them with plaster.

<sup>3</sup> Write on them all the words of this law  
 when you have crossed over  
 to enter the land the Lord your God is giving you,  
 a land flowing with milk and honey,  
 just as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, promised you.

<sup>4</sup> And when you have crossed the Jordan,  
 set up these stones on Mount Ebal,  
 as I command you today, and coat them with plaster.

<sup>5</sup> Build there an altar to the Lord your God, an altar of stones.  
 Do not use any iron tool on them.

<sup>6</sup> Build the altar of the Lord your God with fieldstones  
 and offer burnt offerings on it to the Lord your God.

<sup>7</sup> Sacrifice fellowship offerings there,

eating them and rejoicing in the presence of the Lord your God.

<sup>8</sup> And you shall write very clearly all the words of this law on these stones you have set up.”

<sup>9</sup> Then Moses and the Levitical priests said to all Israel, “Be silent, Israel, and listen!

You have now become the people of the Lord your God.

<sup>10</sup> Obey the Lord your God and follow his commands and decrees that I give you today.”

<sup>11</sup> On the same day Moses commanded the people:

<sup>12</sup> When you have crossed the Jordan, these tribes shall stand on Mount Gerizim to bless the people: Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Joseph and Benjamin.

<sup>13</sup> And these tribes shall stand on Mount Ebal to pronounce curses: Reuben, Gad, Asher, Zebulun, Dan and Naphtali.

<sup>14</sup> The Levites shall recite to all the people of Israel in a loud voice:

<sup>15</sup> “Cursed is anyone who makes an idol—a thing detestable to the Lord, the work of skilled hands—and sets it up in secret.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>16</sup> “Cursed is anyone who dishonours their father or mother.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>17</sup> “Cursed is anyone who moves their neighbour’s boundary stone.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>18</sup> “Cursed is anyone who leads the blind astray on the road.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>19</sup> “Cursed is anyone who withholds justice from the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>20</sup> “Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his father’s wife, for he dishonours his father’s bed.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>21</sup> “Cursed is anyone who has sexual relations with any animal.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>22</sup> “Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his sister, the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>23</sup> “Cursed is anyone who sleeps with his mother-in-law.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>24</sup> “Cursed is anyone who kills their neighbour secretly.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>25</sup> “Cursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

<sup>26</sup> “Cursed is anyone who does not uphold the words of this law by carrying them out.”

Then all the people shall say, “Amen!”

Now I haven't read out chapter 28.

But it continues with the blessings of the covenant.

So you have Israel divided in half.

Six tribes on Mt Ebal to pronounce the curses.

Six tribes on Mt Gerezim to pronounce the blessings.

That was what Moses commanded should happen  
when the nation got into the Promised Land  
and that was what Joshua was doing.

And you can see from the details,

that Joshua was following them to the letter.

An altar of uncut stones on which an iron tool had never been used.

The altar covered with plaster

so that a copy of the Law could be written on it.

This is all according to Moses' prescription.

Why was Moses so definite about the type of stones?

Because the Canaanite altars were made of stones cut into brick shapes.

He didn't want this altar ever to be used for Canaanite worship.

Why did he want it covered in plaster?

So that the Law could be written on it.

The Law was the big difference

between Yahweh and the gods of the Canaanites.

They had their gods.

But they had to invent ways of pleasing them.

What does Baal want from you so that your crops will succeed?  
Maybe some sacrifices, but who really knows?  
Baal hasn't revealed his will.  
Yahweh on the other hand has given a written law.  
Look it's written down on his altar.  
We know exactly what he expects of us.

And so the written Law is central to the covenant.  
The Law is what distinguishes Israel from the nations round and about.  
Israel has the very words of God.  
The nations are making it up as they go along.

And what has happened just prior to this incident?  
We've had the conquests of Jericho and Ai.  
These are if you like  
an enactment of the blessings and curses of the covenant.  
In the lead up to the conquest of Jericho,  
Israel had done exactly as Yahweh had commanded them.  
And they walked in God's blessing.  
But with Achan's sin, Israel broke the covenant.  
And what happened?  
The curses of the covenant came down upon them.  
They were routed by the men of Ai.  
And then Joshua removed the offense from Israel,  
by removing Achan.  
And we didn't read what happened next,  
but in the early part of chapter 8,  
they went back to Ai and conquered the city.  
After restoring the relationship with Yahweh,  
they were back in the blessings of the covenant.

You might think Joshua is a military story.  
Much of what is recounted is military.  
But underlying the military success is faithfulness to the covenant.  
So this covenant renewal ceremony is a big part of the national life.

This is the covenant that lies behind all of the military success.  
And the written word of God is backbone of the covenant.  
The word of God is written on the altar.  
The word of God is read out to all the people.

I can't emphasise enough  
that nothing has changed for the people of God today.  
We aren't going to be fighting wars as God's foot soldiers.  
But we are in a war of sorts.  
As Paul tells the Ephesians,  
Eph 6:12 "Our struggle is not against flesh and blood,  
but against the rulers, against the authorities,  
against the powers of this dark world  
and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms."  
We're not engaged in a physical war,  
but it's war none the less.  
And what are our weapons for the battle?  
The Ephesians are told to put on the armour of God.  
And the key weapon is the sword of the Spirit,  
which is the word of God.  
The battle field might have changed,  
but the weapon has not.  
The written Law of God, the Word of God, the Bible.

What does that mean for us as a church?  
We can't expect that God will bless a church  
that is not faithful to the Scriptures.  
When Israel departed from the Law of God,  
they were routed in battle.  
When we depart from the Scriptures,  
we will be routed in our spiritual battle.  
Even this last week,  
the Australian Anglican Church's highest court,  
the Appellate Tribunal has given an opinion  
that is not faithful to the Scriptures.

Well we can't expect God to bless our denomination if it goes in that direction.

Thankfully, the majority opinion seems to be that we should avoid going in that direction.

That is a great mercy.

But we shouldn't down play the significance of what is going on. Israel could have been tempted to shrug the shoulder at Achan's sin. "Oh it's only a bit of silver and gold.

It doesn't really matter."

But faithfulness to the covenant does matter.

Choosing between the curses pronounced on Mt Ebal and the blessings pronounced on Mt Gerezim is choosing between life and death.

We also shouldn't expect that we can pick and choose the bits of the covenant that we like.

It's not like going to an ice cream parlour.

OK I'd like rum and raisin, and hazelnut chocolate,

but I won't have mint because that tastes like toothpaste.

God's Word is not an assortment where you choose the bits you like.

His covenant is just one covenant.

You break any part of it,

and the whole covenant is broken.

You're not going to say to the policeman who pulls you over for speeding,

"Hey officer, I have a zero blood alcohol level.

So I really haven't broken all the law, just a little bit."

It doesn't matter which bit you broke, you broke the law.

How does that fit with grace and forgiveness?

The hallmark of Christianity

is that it's about God's grace in the face of human sin.

How does this fit with renewing covenants

and breaking covenants?

Well strange as it may sound to some ears,

grace and forgiveness didn't start with Jesus.

Grace and forgiveness is there in the OT too.

The whole sacrificial system was put in place as part of the covenant so that God's people could have access to forgiveness of their sins.

God's grace is in the OT too.

Joshua didn't conquer the Promised Land

because he somehow earned the privilege.

He conquered the Promised Land

because he was heir to a promise made to Abraham.

That promise was made to Abraham first,

before God placed any requirements on him.

Grace comes first.

Forgiveness is always necessary.

But as those who have received his grace,

God expects his people to live his ways.

It's possible for a nation or a church or a person

to walk away from God's grace.

Forgiveness is not automatic,

it comes after repentance.

Israel had to deal with Achan's sin

before their relationship with God was restored.

Well we're nearly done,

but there's one more thing that jumps out at me from this passage.

Who is there when the covenant is renewed?

I mean this is a very important official ceremony.

Who gets an invite?

We have some important ceremonies in Australia.

Maybe the opening of parliament.

Maybe the ceremony at the Shrine on Remembrance Day.

Who gets invited?

The VIPs.

The Governor General, the Prime Minister,

maybe a veteran who fought in WWII.  
 But who gets invited to the covenant renewal ceremony in Josh 8?  
 Josh 8:33 "All the Israelites, with their elders, officials and judges,  
 were standing on both sides of the ark of the covenant of Yahweh,  
 facing the Levitical priests who carried it.  
 Both the foreigners living among them and the native born were there."  
 Who gets to come along?  
 Everyone.  
 There are some people who aren't Israelites living among the nation.  
 People like Rahab who we met a few weeks ago.  
 Should she come with her family?  
 Yes absolutely.  
 She might not be an Israelite,  
 but she's put her faith in Israel's God.  
 She needs to be there.  
 And that goes for all the foreigners.  
 You couldn't come and live in Israel  
 unless you were prepared to worship Israel's God.  
 So everyone was part of the covenant renewal ceremony.

But this wasn't a short ceremony.  
 Joshua read out the whole law.  
 Can you imagine it?  
 OK we're going to have our Bible reading now.  
 All right, which passage would you like me to read.  
 No, you are not understanding me.  
 This is a Bible reading where we start at the start and finish at the end.  
 We're reading the Bible.  
 Ooh gosh, I think the kids might get a bit restless.  
 Even if it's just the book of Deuteronomy,  
 that would take quite a while to read out.  
 34 Chapters is a long Bible reading.  
 Maybe we should let the kids go and play while the adults listen.  
 Josh 8:35 "There was not a not a word of all that Moses commanded  
 that Joshua did not read to the whole assembly of Israel,

including the women and children,  
 and the foreigners who lived among them."  
 But the children might not understand everything.  
 It doesn't matter.  
 If they don't understand everything,  
 they will understand that it's an important event.  
 You can tell them that the covenant is being renewed.  
 That we are making sure the nation stays faithful to its God.  
 It doesn't matter if they don't understand everything.  
 What matters is that everyone gets the message,  
 being faithful to Yahweh is everyone's job.  
 It's not just Joshua's job.  
 It's not just the elders, officials and judges job.  
 It's not just the job of the native born.  
 It's everyone's job.  
 It's not just the job of the adults.  
 They might be making most of the decisions today.  
 But kids make decisions.  
 And one day they will be running the show.  
 So it's everyone's job.

If that was true for Joshua's day,  
 how much more is it true for today.  
 We live in the age when the Holy Spirit has been poured out.  
 Acts 2:17 "In the last days, God says,  
 I will pour out my Spirit on all people.  
 You sons and daughters will prophesy,  
 your young men will see visions,  
 your old men will dream dreams.  
 Even on my servants both men and women,  
 I will pour out my Spirit in those days."  
 Staying faithful to the covenant is everyone's job.  
 That's true both in your own life.  
 You have responsibility for your own salvation.  
 You can't blame your parents for not bringing you up right.

You can't blame the minister for not teaching the Bible right.  
He will be held accountable for his teaching,  
but you are not going to get a free pass if he did a rubbish job.  
You have responsibility for you.

It's also true in the church.

We all have a responsibility to help our church to stay faithful.

If you see someone wandering off track,  
you can help lead them back on track.

With gentleness and a humble spirit,  
knowing that there but for the grace of God go I.

Well let me summarise.

1. Joshua is not about military victory,  
it's about faithfulness to the covenant.
2. Faithfulness to the covenant  
is about heeding the written word of God.
3. Faithfulness to the covenant is everyone's job.