

Covenant Service 2025 Notes

At the start of each year at St Michael's we celebrate Covenant Sunday. Covenant Sunday was started by John Wesley, the leader of Methodism. It was a way to bring to mind the great blessings God has lavished upon us in Christ, and to recommit to the God who has done so much for us. Other traditions have adopted this Methodist practice, and it is now celebrated across the world.

Our texts this week compare the two most important covenants made in Scripture: the covenant by any made by God with Israel through Moses, and the covenant made by God with the Church through Christ. There are both continuities and discontinuities between these two covenants. On the one hand, there is only one people of God, and God has always been faithful in his relationship with his people across the millennia. This never changes. Further, the basics of what the people of God should be doing does not change. We have always been called to be holy, to serve others and to witness to God before the nations.

Yet there are also discontinuities between the covenant made with Israel through Moses and the covenant made with the Church through Christ. The most important one is that under the new covenant, 'sealed by my blood', as Jesus says at the Last Supper, *God himself* fulfils our duties on our behalf. According to writers like Paul, the Law that stood at the heart of the Old Covenant was difficult or even impossible to fulfil, so that there was a sense of fear and condemnation tied to it. Yet because Christ lives a perfect life and death on our behalf, if we are in Christ, we ourselves have done all that he has done. That means that *we* have lived a perfect and blameless life in the eyes of God, having been made holy or justified by Christ.

This is a great mystery, a mystery which we celebrate at every baptism, when we as individuals die and rise with Jesus. Yet the practical implications - while no less extraordinary - are more intelligible. Because our duties under the Law are fulfilled by Christ, we do not follow and serve God out of obligation or fear but gratitude and love. God offers himself fully in our place, and we respond in kind by giving ourselves to him and to others. The New Covenant, made possible by Christ, is less like two business people entering into a contract and each fulfilling their duties out of fear of being sued, and more like a perfect wedding match, where each party gives themselves fully to the other, and serves and aids them out of love. Such is the mystery of faith.

The Texts

Exodus 24:12-18

¹² The Lord said to Moses, 'Come up to me on the mountain, and wait there; and I will give you the tablets of stone, with the law and the commandment, which I have written for their instruction.' ¹³ So Moses set out with his assistant Joshua, and Moses went up into the mountain of God. ¹⁴ To the elders he had said, 'Wait here for us, until we come to you again; for Aaron and Hur are with you; whoever has a dispute may go to them.'

¹⁵ Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. ¹⁶ The glory of the Lord settled on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it for six days; on the

seventh day he called to Moses out of the cloud. ¹⁷ Now the appearance of the glory of the Lord was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. ¹⁸ Moses entered the cloud, and went up on the mountain. Moses was on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

2 Corinthians 3

³ Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Surely we do not need, as some do, letters of recommendation to you or from you, do we? ² You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, to be known and read by all; ³ and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

⁴ Such is the confidence that we have through Christ towards God. ⁵ Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, ⁶ who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.

⁷ Now if the ministry of death, chiselled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, ⁸ how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? ⁹ For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory! ¹⁰ Indeed, what once had glory has lost its glory because of the greater glory; ¹¹ for if what was set aside came through glory, much more has the permanent come in glory!

¹² Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, ¹³ not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. ¹⁴ But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. ¹⁵ Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil lies over their minds; ¹⁶ but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. ¹⁷ Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. ¹⁸ And all of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of the Lord as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another; for this comes from the Lord, the Spirit.

1. What do you think of when you hear the word 'covenant'? Is it a helpful word?
2. The 'God of the Old Testament' is sometimes held up as being a cruel or despotic God. Do you think that's fair?
3. In our passage from Exodus, God gives Moses the Law for the 'instruction' of the people of God. How do you feel about being 'instructed' by God? Does our society want to be 'instructed' by God?
4. Paul employs a number of images in 2 Corinthians 3 to draw a contrast between Moses and Israel and Jesus and the Church. What is the jist of what he's saying?
5. If Christ has fulfilled the Law and the Covenant on our behalf, and justified us before God, why do we need to do anything God wants? Can't we just do whatever *we* want?

6. Activity: draw two connected rectangles on a piece of paper, rather like an open book (or two stone tablets!). On the left-hand side, write down some of the amazing things God has done. It could be things that God has given just to you, or things he has given to both you and others. Having done that, write down on the right-hand side how you are going to respond to these gifts.