

## COVENANT SERVICE

### Theme of Commitment

**Bible Readings:** Jeremiah 31: 31-34

Matthew: 11: 27-30

John 15: 1-8

We come together early in this new year to join in a covenant service. It offers us the opportunity to renew our covenant with God – to renew our commitment to him. We remember the covenant that God has made with his people throughout history. The idea of a covenant service comes from John Wesley, who lived in the C18. He was the great English founder and leader of the Methodist movement. On the first occasion when he proposed that people renew their covenant relationship with God, 1800 people responded. Many churches since have held a covenant service at the start of every year.

Our purpose is to be reminded of and to recognise our deep need of God's grace, and to remember that we cannot experience forgiveness outside the grace of God. We renew our commitment to him, that was confirmed in our baptism.

Two stories of commitment.

### **Polycarp**

A wonderful example of commitment and keeping a covenant relationship with God until death is found in the story of the devout Christian bishop, Polycarp. Church history documents record that he was a direct pupil of the apostle John, and lived between 70 and 155 A.D. This was a period when the emperors of Rome unleashed bitter attacks against Christians who suffered persecution and death.

At the age of 86, Bishop Polycarp was arrested on the charge of being a Christian – a member of a politically dangerous cult whose rapid growth needed to be stopped. Amidst an angry mob, the Roman proconsul challenged him to worship the emperor as a god along with the other gods of Rome. To escape torture and death, Polycarp had to declare, "Caesar is Lord" and offer a small pinch of incense to Caesar's statue.

To this Polycarp responded, "Eighty-six years I have served Christ, and He never did me any wrong. How can I blaspheme my King who saved me?" Steadfast in his stand for Christ, Polycarp refused three times to compromise his beliefs, and was burned alive at the stake.

Would there be enough to arrest us on a charge of being a Christian?

### **The second story is about Eric Liddell.**

This is the story featured in the film, *Chariots of Fire*. Eric Liddell was a Scottish runner and a Christian, who competed and won a gold medal in the Olympic Games in Paris in 1924. He was originally expected to run in the 100 metres, and the 4x100 and 4x400 relays, his best events, and the events for which he trained. When he learned that the preliminary heats were on Sunday, he refused to run – and decided instead to run in the 200 metres and 400 metres events, which were on other days. Sundays were viewed differently then, compared with today, but Eric considered Sunday to be sacred, a day set apart for the Lord, and he decided to honour his convictions.

On Sunday July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1924, while the heats were taking place for the events he was originally listed for, he preached in a Paris church. Several days later he won the 400 metre race, earning a gold medal and a world record.

***Chariots of Fire scene:***

*We pick up the film at the point where Eric is about to run a race in Scotland, and then he talks to a crowd. Listen carefully to what he says. 'Power comes from within. If you commit yourself to the love of Christ, that is how you run a straight race.'*

After winning at the Olympics, Eric Liddell eventually went to China as a teacher and missionary. 'Complete surrender' was a constant theme of his ministry. In 1943 he was imprisoned in a Japanese war camp, during which he supervised a sports program for the prisoners. Each morning he would spend time studying his Bible. In the war camp, his health deteriorated as a brain tumour took hold of his body. He died in 1945, his last words being, 'It's complete surrender.'

***Chariots of Fire scene:***

*Watch the scene that shows Eric winning the race at the Olympic Games. Again, listen to the theme of commitment.*

Both Polycarp and Eric Liddell lived with great faithfulness and solid commitment to Christ. They could both say, with Paul, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.' 2 Timothy 4: 7

Wouldn't it be wonderful if that could be said about us at the end of our life?

**What about us?**

We are in a country where we are not in danger of being persecuted for being a Christian. The greatest danger for us is the threat of apathy and indifference to the Christian faith; of not caring that Christ died for us. We do not need to be famous or skilled, like Eric Liddell, to make a difference for Christ. God only asks that we serve him faithfully and with all our heart in whatever we do. 'Complete surrender' to Christ is the basis of our covenant with God.

Eric's words are inspiring, 'God made me for a purpose – and he made me fast. When I run, I feel his pleasure.' Discover the purpose for which God made you – and live it out.

The idea of covenant is a very deep and meaningful one. Jesus invites us into a covenant relationship with God. This is a personal invitation and an invitation to the church. As individuals and as a church, we confess that we have not always done or been what God expects. We have not always submitted to the Lordship of Jesus Christ over us. We come to the time in the service where we will commit ourselves – personally and corporately – to the Lord. We lay all of our hopes for our personal lives and our hopes for this church on Christ.

Where does the power come from to finish the race? To keep our commitment, our covenant, until the end of our life? The power comes from within – the Holy Spirit giving us the strength to be faithful to the end.

What we are about to say are words which need to come from our heart. It is important that we say them with as much meaning as we possibly can, because God is here in a very real way, and he hears the commitment we are about to make.

**The Covenant**