

The God we worship.

Sunday 17th March 2024.

Lent 5.

One of the most memorable and satisfying moments whilst Chaplain on the ward at the local hospital, was with a small group of people, just quietly sharing. On this particular occasion, there were about six participants, giving everyone sufficient time to relate their own experiences of Mental Illness and what was helpful during the tough times. There were a few Christians present and it wasn't long before the "God Talk" began. However, there was a young man who felt courageous enough to give voice as to his inability to believe in God.

After a little silence, from everyone, I asked what kind of God could he believe in? I offered him pen and paper and he began writing down his idea of what a God would have to be like, for him to have faith. He wrote these words:- forgiving, merciful, just, compassionate, understanding, patient, loving and kind.

So who is the God that we worship? At this time, when we recognize the season of Lent, it is good to reflect on what we really believe, and who is central to that belief. America has the saying "In God we trust", which god is that? Is it the money on which it is printed or is it a god of our own making?

Some of my favourite Bible passages are what we have been reading today. These remind us that God is a Covenant God in relationship with his people including all of us. (Jer.31 31-34)

Covenant can be understood as an alliance between two partners with such content as: solidarity, goodwill, friendship, peace, prosperity, and to faithfully serve in accordance with the covenant laws, ordinances or stipulations. Usually there is an active component to confirm, like a declaration, or active participation of those concerned.

God's covenant has the underlying principal of sacrificial Love. In essence, it is an unfolding of God's true nature with the purpose to save and create a people for himself. (Jer.7:23).

"Obey my voice and I will be your God and you shall be my people. Walk in the way I command you, so that it may be well with you."

When people marry, they enter into a covenant with each other.

If the partners actively believe and work on this principal of love that binds together, it is a wonderful thing. If the vows are not taken seriously, often pain, hurt and brokenness are the result. St. Paul uses this in his writing to the Ephesians 5.28-33, where he writes about marriage as being like a great mystery between Christ and the church, with the underlying principal of sacrificial love.

It is not always between two equal parties. There can be an in-balance of power but with love, commitment and a desire for the best possible outcome for both parties at its core, it is trustworthy.

There are some significant examples of this in our Bible that reveal an unfolding relationship between God and His people. In Genesis there are two parties, one the Lord God Creator and the other his created humankind. Adam and Eve.

2. There is the promise of good welfare, with the one stipulation for Adam, not to partake of the "tree of the knowledge of good and evil." They failed the test and as a result of their disobedience, were banished from the Garden. Consequences were announced that would affect their daily lives. They lost their innocence as well as a very intimate relationship with their Creator. However, they were encouraged to "Go forth and multiply" (Gen 1 - 2) by a still faithful God. Not long afterwards the first murder took place when Cain killed his brother Abel (Gen 4.).

Because there was degeneration, corruption and violence, on the earth, God was grieved and sorry that he had made man. However Noah, "who walked with God and was righteous in his sight," his family also birds, animals and insects, were delivered from the deluge with the provision of the ark for their safety. After his deliverance, Noah built an altar and offered burnt offerings.

God was pleased and promised to never again curse the ground, nor to destroy every living creature because he knew that the "inclination of the human heart is evil from youth." Here is recognition that mankind is the problem. Placing the bow in the sky also would remind Him of his promise to never again destroy every living creature nor to curse the ground. (Gen. 8:20 ,9.v8)
To Noah the injunction was to go forth, multiply and fill the earth. Human life is deemed as sacred with accountability for taking of another human life. All food was for sustenance except the consuming of flesh with it's blood. (Gen ch.7-8).

Abram was promised by God to become the father of all nations through his own offspring, (Sarai) He was tested to the limits of faith by being asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. At the last minute there was a substitute provided by the Lord (Gen 22-8) God. (Rom.4:3) Jesus, God's own son was sacrificed at Calvary. Because of his faithfulness, he was blessed materially and promised a land in which his offspring could dwell and prosper. He became the Father of many nations and the "father of faith." (Heb.11 -17) Both their names were changed to Abraham and Sarah and circumcision of all males was required. (Gen 17.9-14)

Moses became known as the "friend of God." He was instrumental in the freeing of the Israelite slaves from their Egyptian masters. Called by the LORD God and obedient to his instructions, he led the people through the desert for forty years. God gave Moses explicit instructions at Mt. Sinai and wrote them on tablets of stone. (10 commandments) These had to be replaced because of the people's rebellion, worshipping the golden calf and already breaking the law before there was a chance to see the "tablets" which God had written for them.

Moses had to passionately intercede for the people, reminding God of his Covenant love.

There were consequences and many who participated were killed. Aaron's excuse was that the people gave him the gold, which he "threw into the fire and out came a calf." (Ex.32. 21-24)

There were also other specific rules, ordinances and regulations, for God's people to live healthily and morally, as his own "treasured possession". To be a set- apart people, revealing the love of God to the rest of the world around them.

3. This was important, especially as they were preparing to enter the Promised Land whose inhabitants were idol worshippers.

David, who later became King, was called a man "after God's own heart." He composed Psalms about the Lord's covenant love for his people and his help to overcome the nation's enemies. (Ps.51, 89). The Lord promised him descendants and a perpetual throne. However, the people were consistently unable to keep their part of the Covenant, which was to obey his commandments and to love him. David also broke the laws of coveting and killing. (Ex 20.13-17).

Here is the dilemma! Prophets like Hosea, were consistently calling the people back to repentance and to change to their ways. (Hosea 6.6.) So what else could a loving, covenant God do to make the situation better for all parties? He couldn't start again and wipe everyone out. That would break his own promise. Mankind obviously needed help. (Prov. 16:25) "It is not within man to change his ways," (Jer 10:23) he needs a new heart and a new spirit. How is this possible? (John 3:5-7.....You must be born anew....from above.)

"Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone, but if it dies it bears much fruit." (John 12:24)
This is Jesus alluding to his coming death and burial. He was not only to have victory over death but the ruler of the world was also to be judged and cast out. The "spoiler" of God's plan, would be overcome. (Jesus' temptation Matt.4). The resurrection meant that the Spirit of Jesus was the way out of this world into the new, everlasting life with God. To know Him, to love Him and to walk his way with Him, for eternity. This takes an inward transformation. A new creation. Jeremiah provides us with one of the most encouraging parts of the Bible (Jer. 31-34) A new Covenant and a new heart "His Spirit is with us" If unsure just ask. Luke 11:9-13.

We don't become perfect overnight but we are a work in progress. Take another look at David's Psalms. He wasn't perfect but his heart was always seeking his Lord and his forgiveness. (Ps.51.) *Cleansing & pardon*

He was aware of his own shortcomings, took responsibility for them. "Purge and wash me, then fill me. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Cast me not away from your presence and take not your Holy Spirit from me."

We can hear in these words, devastation if God forsakes me but if my Covenant God hears my penitent cry and renews me, I will be filled with joy, overflowing.

In the coming days towards celebrating Easter, it is a good time for reflection as to where we are and where we are going.

Do we know Him already, or wish to "see Jesus," like the Greeks requested. Now is the time to make choices and with the Lord's help we can have everlasting peace with his abiding presence within us.

May the Lord be with us all.