

Remember the Covenant

Rev. Simon McLeay



How do you make a promise that you really mean? How do you make a promise special? Do you gather a pile of witnesses? Do you make a blood pact? Do you pay a lawyer and sign with a special pen?

I want to talk about serious promises today. God's serious

promise to you, and to me, and the serious promises we make to each other. In Abraham's day they had a way of making serious promises, they would cut a covenant. They didn't have a lot of paper nor a lot of lawyers, when they made a serious promise they would cut the throat of an animal and eat a meal together. First promise, God loves you – he loves you with an everlasting love and he desires to see you do well. Second promise, God created marriage to be a cornerstone of human community, marriage flourishes on serious promises made good. Third promise, in this land Maori and Pakeha promised to treat each other justly – that's an incredibly important promise to remember on Waitangi day.



150 years ago the first Presbyterian minister came to Tauranga, he left Scotland and travelled by boat to the far side of the world to serve and to lead people in this congregation. Rev George Morris was his name and he lasted here about a year, before the Waihi gold rush took too many of

his parishioners away. I wonder whether he went home to Scotland depressed, thinking he had failed and yet 150 years later his courage has been rewarded. 10 years later another minister had arrived, land had been given and the first St Peters was built. What commitment those early pioneers had to the gospel. I want to talk about covenants today and the heart of covenant is faithfulness. Faithfulness is as important today as it was 150 years ago. Faithfulness is the foundation of faith, the glue in marriage and hope for our nation.



It's been really hot recently, we are very lucky to have a swimming pool at our place, but boy it takes a lot of maintenance, chemicals and work. A swimming pool is a good picture of a family, a marriage, a nation. A well looked after swimming pool is a cool clear delight. Who loves having a swim on a hot day in a

clear pool? But, have you ever seen a swimming pool go green. A lake goes weedy, a river become murky. Yuck! A swimming pool needs constant attention, you check the chemicals, vacuum the pool, add a little of this, turn the pump on, clean the filter. What better analogy for relationships? Relationships need work, regular work, a little attention and then they are a cool clear delight. But if they are neglected, then there is a long slow process of making it right again. And if you just keep neglecting they don't get better on their own, families, marriages race relations. So as I talk about covenants today I want you to have two pictures in your mind; a cool clear beautiful pool and a green dirty one.



Let me tell you this story about Abraham, the man considered the father of our faith. A man who heard God's voice and followed God, who believed God, who trusted in God and risked everything to follow Him. Well God had promised Abraham children, a mighty nation, and in Genesis

15 God is wanting to reinforce this promise. **And so he uses the language of the time.** In Abraham's time – if you wanted to make a solemn promise to someone you would agree a covenant with them. The Hebrew word is literally you would cut a covenant with that person. So God gets Abraham to slaughter some animals, and to lay them out cut in half, a sheep, a goat, a calf, and two birds. God repeats his promise to Abraham and then a pot of fire passes between the animals. That must have been awesome! This is a symbol of God's deepest promise. We think that even then, people usually ate the meat, eating together sealed the covenant. The killing of the animals also carried a sense of a blood promise. And of course animals were the currency of the time, of great value. God's Covenant is right at the heart of

our faith, and it is a promise by God, **Faith is only possible because of the faithfulness of God**, it doesn't ultimately rest on us, it starts with God and his faithfulness. So I want to say to you; no matter what you have done over summer, over the last few years, over your life time. **God loves you and desires to build or rebuild a relationship with you.** The foundation of covenant, of promise of faithfulness is God and God's faithfulness.



So what is a covenant? Is it just an old fashioned word? No there is an important difference between a covenant and a contract. A contract relies on two parties holding up their agreement as long as the other person holds up their side. If one person reneges on the contract then the

whole contract is void. It is a conditional promise. Spark will continue to connect me to their network as long as I pay.

A covenant involves both parties making promises that they intend to keep regardless of whether the other person keeps their part of the bargain. A violation of the covenant by one party doesn't void the whole covenant. With a covenant there are often consequences depending on the behaviour of each party. But the basic idea is that a covenant is not quickly voided by the actions of one party. In corporate law, people will often look for the smallest loophole, "you failed to do that", so I am released from the contract. In a covenantal situation no-one is looking to quickly get out of the deal.

I think a blood relationship is the best example of spiritual covenant. When you have a child, they are yours to love and cherish and care for until the day you die. I often wish young men would realise that when they father a child, they will have a financial responsibility for that child for the next 18 years. And a spiritual responsibility for life. Now sometimes a child needs to leave home, but as a parent we are never free to stop loving that child.



Secondly let's talk about marriage as a covenant. CJ and Melody got married Yesterday 1 day. Several couples here have managed 60 years together and quite a few 40 years. Karen and I are privileged to have made it to 25 years married on Tuesday. I feel enormously

fortunate to have had two parents that remained together. I feel enormously fortunate to have met Jesus and so to have had his coaching in our marriage. I feel enormously privileged to have had a partner who has stuck by me through these 25 years. I don't pretend to be a role model. But I want to honour Karen, the most beautiful, kind and smart woman I know, my partner, a great mother and my friend. I want to share again with you this wonderful ideal that the bible holds out, this promise and this possibility to inspire you.

A marriage is a covenant where we promise to love another person, not dependent on their action but dependent on our character. Jesus who was unmarried compared his relationship with the church to a marriage, and he talked about sacrifice and love and giving of yourself for the sake of the other.

I read Graham Reid's autobiography this January and I found it inspiring. Graham headed up the social services at Spreydon Baptist church and helped us when we were reviewing St Peters House. Graham married a good woman who had bipolar disease, she would have fine months and then chaotic months, where she would be up all night, sometimes screaming, sometimes telling the neighbours that Graham wanted to kill her. She would spend weeks on end in a psychiatrist hospital. Graham inspires me because he stuck with Carolyn all the way, through the good and bad, they had a family, sometimes he would need to go and find a place to sleep in the middle of the night. But he hoped the best of his Carolyn and they determined to get through with God's help. I know some of you have partners who are going through hard times. I want to say to you, hold on to Jesus because he can hold on to you. I want to say to you he can give you the strength that you do not have. This idea of a covenant is not just a crazy biblical idea – it is the founded in God's own loving nature in his Faithfulness.

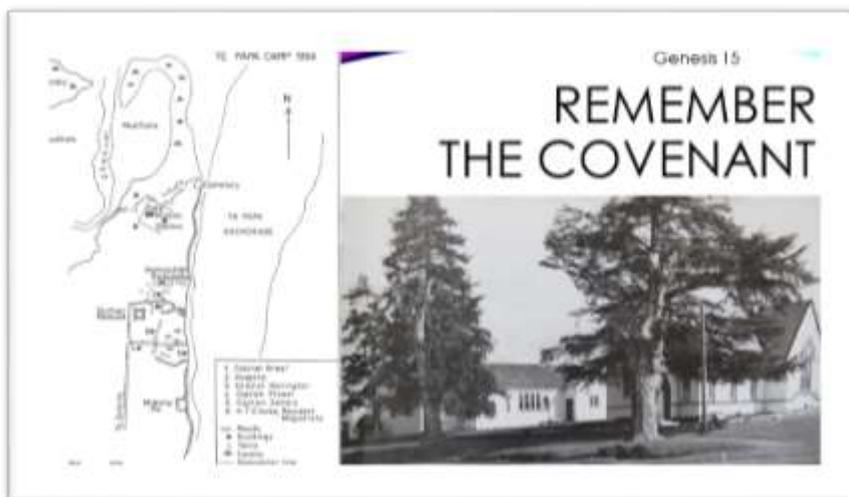
When Maori signed the Treaty of Waitangi they were very influenced by this idea of a Covenant in the Old Testament. The missionaries portrayed the treaty in this way. Maori thought they were signing a spiritual covenant, a promise from Queen Victoria to be faithful to them and protect them, as they were promised all the rights of citizenship. The treaty was embraced by the missionaries, but it was also the product of an evangelical Anglican desire in the Colonial office to look after people. To protect Maori from unscrupulous English traders and settlers. The Treaty of Waitangi was a direct response to the appalling way that aboriginals were treated in Australia. But let's be careful about that comparison. Is it good enough in NZ to say well at least we're better than Australia and America. In those nations



native populations were mown down and slaughtered for their land, let us not compare ourselves favourably to a Holocaust and think that is enough. In the 1860's large tracts of NZ land were confiscated unjustly from Maori following the NZ civil war, because of the settler lust for land. I

think many Pakeha don't understand just how deeply those unjust confiscations have influenced our culture.

In this nation I believe that the treaty is a covenant between Maori, non-Maori and God and we continue to need to navigate our way through. If the pool is still a bit green, we need to keep tending this relationship.



So what should we say as Christians on Waitangi day. I think we should learn the stories, and realise that for many of our citizens there remains and is only beginning to lift a cloud over their lives because of land confiscation. And we as people of the bible should be in the forefront of people

saying this covenant of Waitangi needs to be honoured and we will support the ongoing hard yards to achieve that. We want to see true partnership, Participation and Protection of Maori treasurers. Like my swimming pool analogy, we need to keep doing the work, until the pool is clear and clean.

This piece of land we stand on was known as the Te Papa block, from Sulphur Point to about 15th Ave. It was good soil used by Maori to grown vegetables. It was sold by local Maori to Archdeacon Brown for use as a mission station, from the elms, with the understanding it would be used for the benefit of the church and Maori. *'That land was acquired and is retained under a solemn Trust that it should be applied to the benefit of the Native race and Church and that it should never be bartered or sold for the mere purpose of raising money'.* Henry Venn Secretary of the Church Missionary Society in London.

I bet many of you know the story of the battle of Gate Pa here in 1864. The British troops came to discourage local Maori from supporting the war in the Waikato. There was a massive bombardment of the pa, and then the troops rushed in and the British suffered a major loss, of the officers who dined with Archdeacon Brown the night before only one survived. Yet even in the victory Maori showed compassion and honour. It's a great story.

Then a few months later up at Te Renga the British got their revenge. It was a slaughter. And following that battle there was surrender and the Maori chiefs trusted the governor to enact a just peace. The governor confiscated ¼ of their land. That's huge, but that was accepted. But what we don't hear about is how over the next few years on the excuse of chasing rebels the soldiers would then go about the bush war, attacking local Maori villages and destroying the crops and in some cases killing the inhabitants. It was this dirty war in the background that I think has caused the greater hurt in Tauranga.

In 1867 Brown gifted the Te Papa block to the Government, what a betrayal that must have felt like because former soldiers were settled in Tauranga with a town section and a bit of land further out to suppress the local resistance. The Te Papa block here in Tauranga now became the home of the soldiers, not the mission.

But this land, that St Peters stands on was given back by the government to the church in 1874. And this land has been used for the benefit of the church and certainly recently for the benefit of Maori and Pakeha together. So when a Maori child attends playgroup here with her Pakeha Brother; or a Maori man comes to a Lifeskills course with his Pakeha sisters, and when Maori and Pakeha join in worship together; an ancient covenant is being honoured and God commands his blessing.



Why does it matter?
We need to nurture and bless our personal relationship with Jesus. We need to nurture and bless our marriages. And we need to attend to land justice in our nation. Because the Kingdom of God is a place where promises are kept.

And just to finish the story in 1980 when the new hall was built here at St Peters, the original St Peters built in 1878 was transported to Rotorua for use by the Rotorua Maori Presbyterian pastorate where it still is!