



Covenant and Kin

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The text of this article was preached on 15 August, 2018 at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford, as the sermon for the Covenant Service at the fourteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies. Dr Cape invites reflection on the painting The Golden Crucifixion by Norman Adams, a couplet from W. H. Auden's poem As I walked out one evening, and the biblical text John 15:5. The text of the sermon is published here as delivered.

COVENANT • SERMON • JOHN 15:5 • KIN • NORMAN ADAMS

O stand, stand at the window, as the tears scald and start.
You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart.

W. H. Auden¹



(*The Golden Crucifixion*, Norman Adams (1993), reproduced with permission)

Friends, take a moment and sit with the painting *The Golden Crucifixion* by Norman Adams. I like it because I have to work at it. It takes a while to see. Christ is centre: fully becoming, being resurrected by God, metamorphosed. On either side, incomplete, still becoming, are we thieves. We grieving women, with outstretched hands, mourning our loss, will not understand what we are seeing for three days. We who nailed him to the cross, not knowing what we do, are in the right-hand corner. We see nothing and are oblivious to the miracle.

When you put yourself in this picture, there are things that follow. While it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, it is also a fearful thing not so to do. We are here to remind ourselves and each other that we have chosen this picture as our defining story because we have said 'yes'; 'yes' to God in Christ, 'yes' to being metamorphosed. God has set our feet on a path of crucifixion and resurrection, sacrifice and blessing, a path of reordering everything, reordering us and our relationships with each other. We forget this, which is why we need to renew our covenant first with God and then with each other.

My father-in-law, John, was born and reared in Seguin, a small town in South Texas. His mother died in childbirth – giving birth to him. His father worked in Austin and spent most of his time there, which meant that John was reared by his two maiden aunts. John recalled that when he was a teenager and on his way out of the house to go on a date, he would walk by his aunts who were sitting at the kitchen table – shelling pecans or black-eyed peas – and before the screen door shut behind him, Aunt Bess would say: ‘John, remember who you are kin to’.

This painting reminds us that one of the things we are doing in this Covenant Service is remembering to whom we are kin – past and present. We remember we are kin to John and Charles Wesley, who came here to Christ College, Oxford. They were poor preacher’s kids, on scholarship, and had to walk to school. Their father managed what little money they had so poorly that he was thrown into debtors’ prison. So it was not surprising that the Holy Club – John and Charles Wesley and George Whitfield – not only met to read Scripture but also visited the prisons and the poor.

John and Charles were ordained here in Christ Church Cathedral. The marker commemorating their ordination is here. As we remember we are kin to the Wesleys, we renew our covenant together, rededicating ourselves to God and to the service of God’s people. I will spare us a complete review of covenant history but will simply remind us that God is the only one who ever kept covenant perfectly. We celebrate today the New Covenant in Christ, which embraces all that went before and now stands as God’s final offer of a fully mutual relationship with his human family: ‘I am the vine; you are the branches’. All covenants come from God’s initiative, from God’s stubborn insistence on bringing us into faithful, obedient relationship, so that we can be happy and so that God can delight in our happiness:

I am your God, and I will be your provident, gracious Lord, Sustainer, and Deliverer *if* you will cast your dependence upon my Providence and live up to my rightful expectations of you (which do not exceed your created powers and potential). I will lay no demands upon you that are beyond your capacities to respond – and in your responding, you will find your self-fulfillment as a gift.

It is not our part of covenant-making to bargain with God, but rather to acknowledge God as God, to trust God’s grace as we see it revealed and made human in Jesus Christ, to confess our inability to free ourselves from our human

bondage to appetites and selfishness, and to dedicate ourselves to that rule of righteousness that God expects of us.

What brings us together in this covenant-making service? We come together to remember, to renew, and to make a fresh beginning, claiming freedom from the fear of death, freedom from the guilt of sin, and freedom from the prison of our self-centredness. 'I am the vine, you are the branches.'

One of my favourite images of the ways our covenant with God changes our relationship with one another is from Abba Dorotheus of Gaza, who lived in the 6th century AD. He wrote:

Imagine that the world is a circle, that God is the centre, and that the radii are the different ways human beings live. When those who wish to come closer to God walk towards the centre of the circle, they come closer to one another at the same time as to God. The closer they come to God, the closer they come to one another. And the closer they come to one another, the closer they come to God.²

What we are doing here today is drawing closer to God and drawing closer to one another.

Remembering Norman Adams' painting and remembering to whom we are kin holds us accountable to Christ and to each other: 'You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart'. Remembering to whom we are kin not only involves the past, but also includes the present.

Let me tell you about a meal I remember every time I celebrate the Eucharist. In 2001, the October after 9/11, I went to South Africa and Mozambique as staff for The Upper Room, a daily devotional guide. We went to start the African Portuguese version of the magazine. We travelled north from Maputo up the Mozambican coast on the one paved road, visiting churches and asking people to share their stories of God. As we rode for several hours, I noticed what I thought was orange construction tape that kept going and going, for miles and miles. After hours of this, I realised there was no construction, so I asked the driver, 'What's going on with the orange tape?' And he said, 'Oh, that orange tape is there to show that there are still land mines out in the fields from our civil war'. Many of those land mines are still there. And due to a recent devastating flood, most of the cattle and wildlife had drowned. Between the war and the flood, survivors either had to fly, climb trees, or run pretty fast.

When we arrived at the church, we were met by forty people, singing and clapping as they welcomed us. Their singing sounded like God's own choir. In our meeting we told the people that we were there to hear their stories of God, and that we wanted to share their stories with others as a witness to their faith. They were delighted, and one man said,

We are so happy to share our stories of God; we have many stories to tell. We have had war, we have had flood and sickness and famine, and we have many stories to tell of how good God has been to us.

Then they prepared lunch for the four of us plus the District Superintendent and his wife, the pastor and his wife, and the lay leader. There were nine of us. They brought out platters of roast chicken cut in half and fried potatoes. I counted the pieces of chicken; there were five whole chickens, cut in half – ten pieces of chicken in all. The pastor reached out and grabbed a half chicken. He tore it apart and said, 'We eat Mozambican style'. So I grabbed my chicken and started eating. I noticed as I looked around at the congregation that the men were sitting on benches, while the women sat on the dirt floor, and other women were serving the people from wooden bowls, spooning out rice over which they poured a little chicken juice. It got harder to chew. There was one half chicken left, and the pastor took it and passed it down for the people to share. I realised, as I ate my chicken, that this was no store bought chicken. The chicken's leg was long, and this chicken had run for its life a long time. I pictured the United Methodist women gathering that morning to decide whose chicken would be lunch. This five-chicken dinner was a sacramental act; this five-chicken dinner was a sacrifice. It was clear, at that moment, that Christ was the host. Christ was the honoured one. It was for Christ they gave their best, their all. It is at table with Christ as host that God is pleased.

Albert Outler once asked: 'What does your learning contribute to the sum of human wisdom, human joy, human happiness, dignity and fulfillment?' What is your offering? What would be your equivalent offering to the five-chicken dinner? What are we, who have much, willing to offer Christ?

'O stand, stand at the window as the tears scald and start. You shall love your crooked neighbour with your crooked heart.' Will we love our crooked neighbour with our crooked heart? Would that be our equivalent sacrifice?

As we remember to whom we are kin, past and present, may we be renewed. God only knows whom God might call us to claim as kin in the future.

Notes

1. W.H. Auden, *As I walked out one evening*, 1937.
2. Dorotheus of Gaza, Instructions VI.