

A New Covenant in Blood

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Preacher: Stephen Hale

[0 : 0 0] to be at a service where people come and declare their faith and their confidence in you. And we pray that we may be encouraged and strengthened through our fellowship together through the reading and study of your word, and as well as that as we share and experience the joy of being with your people together.

And so we commend this time together, and particularly this sermon that should help me to be able to concentrate and focus, and that what we think about tonight might be an encouragement to us, and we pray that in Christ's name.

Amen. When I was 21 years of age, I was sent off by the education department to teach in the country in New South Wales, back in the era when you used to go to uni in some cases, and you had a teacher's scholarship, and that helped you to get through uni, and they paid your fees and you gave a bit of money to live on, and then you were obligated to go wherever they sent you.

And in that era, on the Australia Day weekend, I received a telegram, and that shows how old I am, because most of you wouldn't know what a telegram is. You've probably seen English movies in the 1930s where they had telegrams.

But nevertheless, I got a telegram saying I was going to this place called Leighton, and I would be there in two days' time. It was 660 kilometres from Sydney, so it was quite a challenging experience to get there in two days' time and to move into the pub.

[1 : 1 1] And I was given free accommodation for two months at the Leighton Hotel in the middle of summer, and it was for, I think, 43 degrees when I arrived in the daytime, and about 38 at night, and all it had was a fan in the ceiling that squeaked.

So it was quite a challenging experience to go to live in the country and then also to go off to an Anglican church, which was radically different to the experience of my childhood. And at this particular church that I went to at St Peter's in Leighton, it seemed to me after a period of time that the minister only had two sermons.

Now, I could have been accused at the age of 21 of being a tad critical. I did go to university and thought I knew everything, of course. But he only appeared to have two sermons. Week one appeared to me that you should be a good person, and week two ought to be that you had to receive the sacrament in order to be saved.

And it was incredibly important for him to come forward and receive Holy Communion because it was in receiving Holy Communion that something magical and special happened. And he never kind of said that that's how you got saved, but that always seemed to be the inference in that particular church.

Now, I guess one of the things I'm trying to do this year in my confirmation sermon, which I do in various places on Sunday nights in the course of mainly the second half of the year every year, is to think about the sacraments.

[2 : 2 0] Because it seems to me in churches like possibly not this one, but many evangelical churches, we never talk about the sacraments because we're very anxious about the overemphasis on the sacraments in the case of the church that I went to when I was 21 years of age and in the case of lots of other Anglican churches around Australia and some in Melbourne that have a similar sort of emphasis.

But the Christian church has two sacraments. They were given to us by Christ. They're both gospel sacraments because they're sacraments that point to Christ and point us to the heart of the Christian faith.

So they were instituted by Christ and in the Anglican church, the two sacraments that we affirm and encourage and participate are in the sacraments of baptism and the sacrament of Holy Communion.

And so tonight I'm going to actually reflect a little bit about that because we're celebrating confirmation, which is those who have been baptized coming forward to confirm for themselves that they indeed want to actually continue to live for Christ and to serve him for the rest of their lives.

So the two sacraments are baptism and they're both Holy Communion. And the simple definition which you'll find in the catechism, which I'm sure those who have been confirmed tonight have studied, is part of their preparation.

[3 : 27] Is that right? Oh, that's Chris. Chris is going, what's the catechism? I mean, when I did confirmation classes back in about 1927, the confirmation classes went for six months and you had an exam at the end of it.

Does anybody remember that sort of era? Yeah. And it was a really uplifting experience. And in fact, the minister we had at the time, it wasn't 1937, of course, because I'm not nearly that old. I'd be retired if I was.

He was a great innovator. He'd introduced what they called film strips. And this was a very contemporary form of communication, which was a little plastic film that had pictures on it. We used to call them strip films. And after 26 weeks, the film strips just got a bit monotonous, I can tell you, in the course called Your Confirmation.

So there's a little booklet called The Catechism, which you will find in the Australian Prayer Book in the Red Book Edition, the larger edition. And it's a sort of a simple summary of what Christians believe. And the definition of baptism, a sacrament, rather, that you'll find in that is it's an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace, an outward sign of an inward and spiritual grace.

So a sacrament is something physical or tangible which points to something inward and something that's a sign of God's grace in a person's life. Now, we're gathered here tonight.

[4 : 46] You all look like Christian people, but in reality, we can't tell whether any of us are believers or not just by looking at someone, can we? You can't see the presence of God in someone's life and the presence of the Holy Spirit in someone's life.

I guess in some traditions, they make it a bit more obvious because some of the things they do. But in general terms, you can't see physically whether someone's a believer. We actually, therefore, are given the sacraments as something tangible to point us to Christ and point to the gospel, which is a reminder of what God has actually done in our hearts and lives because it's an outward sign of something that is inward and something spiritual.

And it's, to use the old-fashioned term, it's a means of grace. So the two sacraments, as I've said, are baptism and Holy Communion. Baptism is a sacrament which reminds us of the fact that we are people who need a good wash because Christian people are people who are honest about the reality of who they are and honest about the reality of the fact that they're people who are in need of a Savior because they're people who are sinners.

They're people who mess up and they don't live their lives consistently in the way that they claim that they will live their lives. Because if you think about it, every person who lives in this world has certain expectations about how they're going to live.

And sometimes people make declarations about how they're going to live. It strikes me that we live in, at this time, in a particularly judgmental era in our culture. And in our culture, if someone does something wrong, they're incredibly quick to condemn and incredibly quick to actually point out what that person has done that is wrong.

[6 : 14] Because that's the nature of living in a society, I think, where you've given up on God because you want instant judgment now. And I think that's part of what's happening in our culture at this point in time. So Christian people are the opposite.

We're honest about the reality of who we are. We're honest about the fact that we're people who mess up. And we're honest about the reality that we actually need someone to help us. We're not pretending that we're people who actually have it all together.

And we're not pretending that we're people who can save ourselves, which is a particular view that's prevalent in some aspects of contemporary culture. Well, so we're people who need a good cleanup.

And Christ, in his death on the cross, came to actually bring about not only our salvation, but as well as that, our restoration, and as well as that, our cleansing and forgiveness. And you could argue that the great blessing of the cross is God's cleansing and forgiveness through what Christ has done for dying for us.

And in baptism, we call to mind the fact that Christ has died for us. And we call to mind and claim for ourselves the reality that in dying for all of humanity, he died for me in particular, and for you in particular, and that Christ has cleansed us and forgiven us.

[7 : 22] The symbolism of baptism is that you go down into the waters and you are covered. And in a sense, you die to sin, and you rise and come out of the waters and rise to new life. And as I said at the Mandarin service, it's a great disappointment to me tonight that we're not having an immersion baptism, because it's always good to see Paul Barker in shorts, in church.

But that's by the by, in terms of this particular context tonight. So baptism reminds us of the fact that we die to sin and we rise to a new life.

And we come, therefore, into a new situation where we stand before God, declared to be forgiven, to be in a new situation. We're accepted by God and declared to be in the right when we know and we've acknowledged ourselves that we are people who mess up.

And that's why the questions that are going to be asked about those who are being confirmed tonight, who are taking on board for themselves commitments made on their behalf when they were children, are questions that relate to baptism.

We ask them, do you turn to Christ? Because baptism is about a turning to Jesus Christ and a committing yourself to live for him. We ask them if they repent of their sins, whether they're going to turn from living a selfish and sinful life.

[8 : 30] We ask them whether they reject selfishness and whether they reject evil. And we also ask them whether they're going to commit themselves to live as a disciple of Christ by loving God with all their heart and loving their neighbours themselves.

Because that's what baptism's about. It's a pointing to Christ, a pointing to Christ's death and the forgiveness and cleansing that flows from that. And the fact that God brings us into a new situation as a resurrected person who has the Holy Spirit living in us, who's seeking to live for Christ and to be his disciple in the world.

So it's a gospel sacrament and it's something that's tangible and a reminder. And all of us are weak, feeble people and not always necessarily having, in a situation where we feel like as Christians, we've got our act together.

Isn't that the case? And it's actually really good to be able to say, I'm a baptised person. Because baptism isn't just a one-off event that happens at some particular moment. Baptism is something that we can claim for ourselves for the rest of our lives because we know that Christ has actually acted in our lives.

He's made us to be our own and we've been baptised into Christ in his death and in his resurrection. And sometimes when we're feeling feeble and weak, it's good to be able to say and to remind ourselves that I am a baptised person.

[9 : 44] Now just a little comment on infant baptism because I think there's a swing away from infant baptism in many churches and I won't be mounting a full defence here because we don't have time. But it seems to me that those of you who have been baptised as infants, which may apply to quite a few people here, is that the case?

Anyone here who was baptised as an infant? Can sometimes feel like that isn't sort of really adequate or it wasn't really good enough in some way. Because I think you'll find that there are people who think that.

It seems to me that if you were baptised as an infant as I was and if you look back on an action that took place in such a way that you had no choice about it, you can still say that you're a baptised person because God has actually been faithful to those baptismal promises made on your behalf and the baptismal commitment that was made on your behalf.

Because prayers were prayed for you and commitments were made, if your parents were believers, then you're within the covenant relationship that God has with parents and their children and you've been brought up as a Christian person and now if you've been confirmed or you're coming for confirmation, you're standing and declaring for yourself that you are Christ's person and Christ's believer.

If you're baptised as an infant, in a sense the faith looks forward and if you're baptised as an adult, then your faith in a sense looks back. But I don't think it really matters whether it's looking forward or looking back.

[11 : 01] It's pointing to the one action which is Christ's work on the cross and that action being claimed for yourself as you take that unto yourself and become a believer and seek to live and express that out.

So the sacrament of baptism is a gospel sacrament and it points us to Christ and tonight in a sense we're fully reflecting on that in this service. But the sacrament of Holy Communion is also another sacrament that's a gospel sacrament because it also points us to Jesus Christ.

And I don't know about you but I don't think I spend a lot of time or nearly enough time thinking about Jesus Christ Monday to Friday. I might be preaching about it on Sunday but it's hard to actually keep our focus on Christ during the week, isn't it?

Well the sacrament of Holy Communion helps us to keep our focus on Christ because again it points us to Christ's death, doesn't it? And it points us to the fact that through Christ's body being broken and through his blood being shed we're cleansed and forgiven and we're brought into a new situation with God.

And in the American church I always like the old-fashioned words of distribution because the old-fashioned words of distribution say take and eat this and remember it's that Christ died for you. It's a pretty powerful thing to have someone say to you personally isn't it?

[12 : 10] And to be reminded that Christ died for you. And then we say take and eat this in remembrance that Christ died for you and feed on him in your heart by faith with thanksgiving. And when we come to the wine or the fruit of the vine as it was said in the reading tonight then we actually are saying drink this in remembrance that Christ's blood was shed for you and be thankful.

See they're both reminders of the heart of our faith aren't they? They're pointing us to Jesus Christ and pointing us to the reality that it's only through Christ's death and it's only through his blood shed that we can come into a relationship with God and only through those things that we can stand as God's people together.

And they're a means of grace because they strengthen us in our walk with Christ and strengthen us to actually keep our focus on Christ and strengthen us as we feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving to actually know Christ afresh and to commit ourselves to live for him afresh in this coming week.

And as well as that it's a sacrament which is a sign of our fellowship together. We're baptised into Christ and baptised into Christ's people and when we come to share in the Holy Communion we share in communion together as God's people.

It's not an individual action it's an action that we share with others. And that's a really good reminder of the fact that the reality of the Christian community is that we're all sinners who've needed a saviour.

[13 : 29] We're all people who accept the reality that we need to reach out our hands to receive from Christ and we have to keep doing that again and again and we're all in the same situation together. It doesn't matter whether you're from Australia or whether you're from some other nation whether you're rich or whether you're poor it doesn't matter whether you're someone who's incredibly highly well known or whether you're someone who's totally insignificant we come and stand together as God's people with hands reached out together to receive to give thanks to celebrate and to commit ourselves to afresh to live for Christ.

So both of these sacraments are means of grace because they're given for us for our benefit so that we can be strengthened in our walk with Christ reminded of Christ's grace that's been poured out to us on the cross and the grace that's been in a sense given to us personally and directly when we turn to Christ but they strengthen us to have the grace to live for Christ today and therefore they're great means of encouragement to us and I think we can be incredibly thankful that Christ in his mercy gave us those sacraments.

Now I guess as I've sometimes said in the past if you in a sense were stuck on the proverbial desert island on your own you wouldn't necessarily you don't need the sacraments in order to be a Christian but you actually Christ in his mercy has given us the sacraments because he recognizes that we're weak people and we need people who need encouragement and we need things that are going to keep pointing us back to Christ.

We have the word of God of course which is the preeminent means by which we know God but the sacraments are an encouragement to us and a means of strengthening us in our weakness to depend upon Christ and to share that together as God's people.

So I hope that's a help to you and an encouragement to you and particularly tonight as we remember baptism and the fact that we're baptized people through Christ as a number come and stand and declare that together before us and we pray these things in Christ's name.

[15 : 18] Amen.