

HOLY TRINITY SUNNINGDALE

Readings: Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12:20-36

Date: 22 March 2015

Theme: APCM Vision

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them, and will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people ... they shall all know me

Those who live and work most closely with me often find me really irritating. For lots of reasons, I am sure. One is that I have little words and phrases that I say again and again. “Friends sharing the adventure together”; “God is good, all the time”; “Changing the landscape”. My latest one is “generous accommodation”.

I think I’ve always been like that since my school days. Interestingly, when I was 14 yrs old and off school in hospital for 6 months, when I returned things were very weird: I was still saying the words and phrases that we had been saying all those months ago. But everyone else had moved on and the words and the phrases were different now. A new chapter had opened up and I became very aware that I needed to get with the programme.

As so many of you know we have been here in Sunningdale now for 17 yrs. I have never before lived in the same house for 17 years nor led a church for that long either.

Encouraged by my friend and colleague Sue we have recently been sorting out my study. Years and years of accumulated paperwork has gone for shredding or for recycling. It is a totally different space now and I am truly grateful for all the time this decluttering has taken and the painstaking work it has involved.

What was revealed in this exercise are the episodes and chapters of the last 17 years – the ups and the downs, the ins and the outs, of this or that latest thing as the story unfolded.

And sifting through took quite some time as the paperwork evoked memories and brought back names and as the photographs threw up faces and people from the past. It’s been quite a journey.

Jeremiah is talking about the past, about the journey he and his people have been on. It’s been a journey with God with its ups and downs and its ins and outs. Memories, names and faces would all be part of that landscape.

But here in chapter 31 Jeremiah describes a new thing. Unlike the old thing. Of a different kind and of a different order altogether.

For Jeremiah the old thing (the old covenant) had been external, it had been intimate but ultimately fractured. External – he took them by the hand. Intimate – he describes himself as their husband. Fractured – he makes it clear that the relationship has been broken.

The new thing (the new covenant), which is here promised and looked forward to, is by contrast internal, personal and for ever. Internal – I will put my law within them. Personal – I will write it on their hearts. And for ever – I will remember their sins no more.

The new thing is unlike the old thing. It's of a different kind and of a different order altogether.

Friends, I believe that we are moving into a new chapter, a new covenant, a new thing here at HTS and in it we are going to need there to be some generous accommodation.

There are some new names and faces in the mix – in the congregation week by week, in the responses to our recent Vision Day, our request for financial support for our ministry and mission, in our serving teams for practical engagement with ministry and mission, on our ER to say I am with you/ I feel like I belong here, on the PCC to say I am willing to take some responsibility here, and on the Deanery Synod to say do you know what: I have a bigger picture than just my own parish.

As you know, we are celebrating our 175th anniversary this year. We are holding a series of special events for all ages, for our church and for our community. The first of these took place on Friday evening at De Veres. A wonderful Quiz Night and supper. We have had some lovely feedback from those who were there and we reckon to have raised around £1000 for the Tearfund Change a Nation programme.

Our next big event is the Flower Festival on Trinity Sunday, 31 May when lots of our friends and neighbours in the community will be celebrating with us and helping to create some spectacular arrangements under the title “All things Bright and beautiful”.

At the same time, Sue and Kathryn and I are inviting people to The Vicarage for a series of Cheese and Wine parties throughout the year and a special tea-party for our older members.

There is something deeply internal, personal and for ever about the moment in which we find ourselves. There is something very exciting about what we are celebrating and what we are trying to do and who we are trying to be. Demonstrating the place the people of God have had in this village and community over the years and the part that they/ that we can play still in making it a better place for good and for God. Conspicuous transformation is what we are about.

Sue and I have been away this week with our ministry colleagues from the deanery for a couple of days to Douai Abbey. We have heard from our retreat facilitator, something of the power of a local church in a village community in Cambridgeshire to bring change and transformation and blessing. We heard last week from Jane Achaloi of the power of a local church to bring change and transformation and blessing in African villages as they discover what it means to be salt and light there and to use their loaves and fishes resources.

There are many, many things to be thankful for and hopeful about here at HTS. This is a good time for us to be moving to new things.

There are at least four new things the PCC has recently agreed to move further into and they are these:

- 1 The Living Wage
- 2 Our patterns of worship
- 3 Our relationship with the Village Hall
- 4 The Heritage Project

The Living Wage

Taking seriously the Archbishop's challenge for churches to pay the living wage to her employees; we have agreed that we should do this from 1 April.

Our patterns of worship

Another is to listen to the voices of those who have come to us asking if we can't express our togetherness better, define our unity more clearly. PCC has agreed to do this too in the way we gather for worship.

Quite amazingly this resonates exactly with what Sue and I feel that God has been saying to us over recent months; exactly what we feel God has been calling us to do. This has been confirmed in unexpected ways in surprising conversations and in what we have heard from conference speakers who know nothing of our situation specifically.

And so from Sunday 12 April we will be making some changes to all our Sunday service times to emphasize and express our sense of belonging better and our desire to reach out to new people more.

The 8am service will move to 8.30am; the 9.15am and 11am will become one service at 10am; and the 6.45pm will become the 6.30pm.

There will need to be a generous accommodation here. There is so much that we have in common: our liturgy, our bible readings, our sermons and our prayers. But let's remember we are attempting to bring together two cultures which for 15 years have been separately defined.

And yet we feel that we have heard God say and we have heard people's voices confirm that the things which divide us are simply music and dress. In our PCC conversation there were concerns expressed and worries articulated very clearly.

And so, Sue and I and the whole PCC want, please, to ask for your trust in this. PCC cannot ignore the fact that our numbers have decreased for a complex variety of reasons. As one of the PCC members said the other evening when we made this decision: "We cannot continue as we are. We have to do this." And we think they are right.

Of course, we will welcome feedback after a few weeks, offer opportunities for open conversation and comment again later in the year. But we ask you please, with us, to listen to what God may be saying in this, and to learn with

us, as others have around the country, that such a move is a move for unity and for growth and not a move for decline. We want so much to be church and community – but we believe we need to find expression of that unity in church first.

We will be saying more about this in due course. But we want to live the change in practice, not just talk about it in theory.

Our relationship with the Village Hall

Another new thing for us to be aware of is that the Village Hall office is moving after Easter to the Pavilion at the Recreation Ground. The Trustees and some of those who work for Village Venues have sought to make this change. It's not of our doing. Nor do we want it. But we are helping with offers of furniture and equipment where we can. The implications of this move for the Village Venues brand have yet to be worked out.

The Heritage Project

I promised that I would keep you up to date with where we were with the HP. As you know, PCC made the decision to put things on pause while we took stock of where we were. I have written to all those who made pledges to explain that.

Having now taken advice, we have taken the view that we should go to planning as we were so nearly there. This is the next step and this will happen in the next few days.

There is then a period of waiting while our case is considered at the end of which we should have a clear sense of the viability of the project. At that point we will be talking again with you about our options and further next steps.

Sue and I spent some time this week with our architect and two members of another church where his firm have a project running. We were so excited and pleased to hear again that this is a spiritual thing, not just a bricks and mortar thing. And that it's ministry and mission which is at the heart of what this other church is doing in its community and location.

Ultimately the building is secondary to what we believe God is calling us to do in building his kingdom and reaching out to those who don't yet know him. The building is at one level a base from which to operate, a more modern and more fit for purpose boat from which to fish, a secure and safe place from which to express God's love for all those who live in our village and to demonstrate his care for them.

Friends, our HP is a means to an end not an end in itself. That is the vision we believe God has given us and that is the vision which we are asking all of us both to support and to bring into being. Never one to miss an opportunity: let me simply say that if you have not yet made a pledge to give a one-off gift, a regular payment over 3 yrs, an interest free loan or an offer of practical help in some way, today might be a good day to do that!

I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah ... I will put my law within them, and will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people ... they shall all know me

It sometimes feels like we are just catching up with what God is doing. The task of the leader is to define reality – to say what's going on. The task of the people is to sense where the wind of God's Spirit is blowing and to go with it. The task for all of us for the future is be more and more the people God wants us to be: people who walk by faith, people who are known by love, people who are a voice of hope for our community.

Let's stand and pray as we ask God to move us into his future, one step at a time, day by day, starting now.

I will make a new covenant ... I will put my law within them, and will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people