

Inter-faith column, Jan 2023 -- Covenant

For many Methodists, the Covenant Service marks the start of New Year. John Wesley was keen that we take this annual commemoration seriously, looking back at how God has been with us in the past and recommitting to how we will be in Covenant with God into the future. We like to think of this service as uniquely Methodist, though Wesley acknowledged its Moravian roots, and many of our ecumenical colleagues are eager to share the service with us today. I've also been thinking about how the Covenant might apply to inter-faith relations.

Some years ago, a Jewish rabbi was present at a Covenant Services I led. His presence, along with a conversation with him after the service, made me acutely aware that the root of the Covenant lies within the Hebrew scriptures, indeed, half of the set readings come from the Hebrew Bible. The liturgy itself in the Methodist Worship book reminds us that "God made a covenant with the people of Israel, calling them to be a holy nation, chosen to bear witness to his steadfast love by finding delight in the law." It goes on to claim: "The Covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord, in his life, work, death, and resurrection." Though I took these as signs of interfaith commitment, my Jewish colleague raised a cautionary eyebrow about whether we Christians might have commandeered the Covenant for our own uses.

I then began to wonder if the Covenant could go beyond the Judeo-Christian realm in terms of who 'God's people' might be. At first glance, the answer is a resounding 'No.' The Deuteronomy 29 reading reminds us that God first established the Covenant by leading God's people *out* of Egypt, away from the influence of other powers and influences and into a new relationship of being God's people even as God would be *their* God. Living 'apart' from what were seen as corrupt influences, i. e. 'detestable things' which were symbolic of other local religious practices, was a call to holy living which would enable them to whole-y be God's people. Thus, the Hebrews were to keep themselves pure by avoiding (and even rejecting) other religions.

And yet, there is an interesting inclusion of 'others' in the set verses from Deuteronomy 29: along with the expected leaders of Israel and the ordinary Hebrew women and children, 'the aliens who are in your camp' are also included with those God is establishing as 'his people.' Does this mean that the Covenant, the intimate relationship between God and the Hebrew people, might extend to others? Granted, the 'aliens' mentioned are apparently slaves or at best hired hands living in the midst of the Hebrew community. But the text also includes 'those who are not here with us today.' One begins to sense that the exclusions are not so much about people or people groups as about religious practices and beliefs, and not just all foreign religious practices but about specific ones.

Earlier in Deuteronomy, we get a clue of what those specifics might be about. We're told that God is "not partial and takes no bribe... executes justice for the orphan and the widow... and loves the stranger, providing them food and clothing." God's people will be those who do the same, in stark contrast with religious practices that seek to kill or expel those who might have posed a burden to society, including those with diseases or physical abnormalities or even unwanted children or barren women. There are passages in which God's wrath comes against those who 'burn their sons and their daughters in the fire to their gods' [Deut 12:31], presumably involved with fertility sacrifices. Other verses speak about how God's people are to protect and nourish the earth.

All these decrees seem to be crystalised in the command in Deuteronomy 30.19 for God's people to 'choose life.' This becomes a watchword for God's Covenant people: do those things which provide and promote health and sustenance for all God's people. It follows that when we find religious practices outside our own traditions which 'choose life,' we are to honour those as well. Listening carefully and compassionately to those of different faiths prevents us from whole-scale rejection of the 'other.'

Our Methodist Connexion's current Growth and Evangelism strategy sets out 'discipleship pathways' which include a dozen different ways to 'choose life' and grow closer to God: from prayer and worship to study and serving and caring. The new strategy also recognizes that any one of these can be an effective starting place, something we can affirm in each other, including those from other faiths. When I observe Sikhs providing free meals for the hungry, I can affirm they are 'choosing life.' When my Muslim neighbour stops everything to pray at set times, I can give thanks that she is active in seeking and sharing God's blessing on the everyday. Even when my rabbi friend suggests I might be intruding on Jewish holy ground by my assumptions of being one of God's 'chosen,' I can hear his warning with grace and reflect again on what is required of God's people. Essentially the Covenant is about choosing life, about 'loving kindness, doing justice, and walking humbly with God' [Micah 6:8]. It's the humility that can keep us from becoming smug about being 'God's people' as if we're the only 'chosen ones.'