

# Words of commitment

This week's worth of readings look at words of commitment: God's commitment to us—full of grace and love—and our more faltering commitment to him. I have traced a path through God's covenant in Deuteronomy, which sets out obligations for both God and us, and then on to a commitment to each other (as seen with Ruth and Naomi) that we learn from God.

When we think of people being committed to each other, we usually think of marriage, so it's not surprising that the example of marriage keeps coming up in the first three readings. As ever, God shows us how strong this can be, giving us a pattern of unswerving love, rock-solid loyalty and endless forgiveness. As we will see, too, with the later readings, he doesn't just leave us an abstract ideal, but carries it through himself as our Father literally embodies it in Jesus and perseveres with it in his Holy Spirit. Then he invites us to join with him in this sharing of love. The readings later in the week go into more detail about what this entails for us.

In John's Gospel, Jesus teaches about how we can be committed to God. He emphasises the way we can live in his love, keeping his commandments. He makes a link between love and obedience, which can be hard for us to grasp at first. Jesus, however, makes it crystal clear that God is committed to us. The whole point is that God joins with us. We abide in him and he in us, in a community of love.

Now, here in this sharing, we are fed by Jesus' body and we become his body here on earth. This is the type of commitment that is a million miles away from a lonely clinging to abstract ideas or a desperate grasping at some aspiration beyond our reach.

We need to be committed; Jesus' message demands a whole-hearted response. On his side, he promises that he will always be with us. So it's not so much a strenuous effort on our part (as if we could do it all on our own), but more a sense of reflecting back something bigger than ourselves and becoming part of him. We become one with God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—abiding in him in love.

*Rachel Boulding*

## Keep calm and carry on—with God

Today you have obtained the Lord's agreement: to be your God; and for you to walk in his ways, to keep his statutes, his commandments, and his ordinances, and to obey him. Today the Lord has obtained your agreement: to be his treasured people, as he promised you, and to keep his commandments; for him to set you high above all nations that he has made, in praise and in fame and in honour; and for you to be a people holy to the Lord your God, as he promised.

This is God's promise to his people and our promise to him. It's a relationship of love and part of the covenant between him and humankind.

It all looks so straightforward set out like this, but, as we see throughout the Old Testament, although God is committed to us, our commitment to him is often a feeble, halting thing. The obvious question then is, 'How can we grow up and stop being squirmy, rebellious children who don't know what's good for us?' We should be mature people who flourish in the great things our Father has prepared for us.

It all becomes a bit like what we know we have to do to keep our bodies healthy: eat proper food and take some exercise. We've heard it all before and the challenge is to get on with it. Like so much of what it means to be committed to something or someone, it's not dramatic, flashy or even particularly interesting in itself: it's more a matter of persevering.

So is it all a case of dogged effort, like people in wartime, when the slogan was first dreamed up to 'Keep calm and carry on'? Surely the point is that we have much more than our own determination to fall back on. We aren't left to fight on our own, like a lonely island in battle. God helps us. God is at work within us, through his Holy Spirit. This is something that he does, not just what we do on our own.

### Prayer

*Go before us, Lord, in all we do with your most gracious favour, and guide us with your continual help, that in all our works begun, continued and ended in you, we may glorify your holy name.*

*Common Worship*

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## A lifetime burning in every moment

And [Naomi] said, Behold, thy sister in law is gone back unto her people, and unto her gods: return thou after thy sister in law. And Ruth said, Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried.

God's commitment to us in his covenant is strong and binding, laying the sure foundation for our life. Here, with Ruth and Naomi, we see what can be built on that rock. God's love and commitment to us create and make possible our love and commitment to each other.

One of my friends had this reading at her wedding. She knew that marriage wasn't just about delicious emotions, but about sticking with someone to the end. As my husband said, in a wonderfully matter-of-fact way, when I was diagnosed with breast cancer: 'Oh, well, in sickness and in health, love.'

Beyond the steadfast grit, is there a wider meaning? Surely the purpose of this commitment between people is to align ourselves with God's purposes, to be in tune with his ways, so that we can share his love. Our purpose is love: to be loved, to love and to spread God's love.

Commitment is a vital part of this, so that the real love isn't side-tracked into the hearts-and-flowers gush that can drain celebrations such as weddings. Commitment provides the element of continuity that ensures our affection isn't just a flash of joy—a spark of inspiration that shines out briefly, then dies away. No, this is 'a lifetime burning in every moment' (as T.S. Eliot wrote in 'East Coker' about looking back over your life).

That is why it's so healthy to begin the day by praising God. Even a minute of prayer reminds us of how God's love continues, every day, and we are part of it.

### Reflection

*'Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us' (1 John 4:11).*

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## Love generates more love

‘As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.’

This passage picks up on our themes of how love is shared and passed on, and the vital need for continuing commitment. It emphasises the link with keeping commandments from the Deuteronomy passage that we read on Sunday. The reason my friend had the passage from Ruth is the same as the reason my husband and I chose this passage for our wedding Gospel reading.

We need to ask why most of us struggle with the idea that love and commandments belong together. Some part of us instinctively recoils from the association between love, which is meant to be free and spontaneous, and commandments, which naturally sound forced and done only under pressure. To think like this, though, is to look at the situation the wrong way round. The Ten Commandments aren’t soldiers’ instructions: they are actually laws about how love works: ‘Remember the sabbath day... You shall not steal’ and so on. Keeping them is joining in with God’s purposes of love and his plans to bring out the best in us all.

Anything else would be fighting against the way that God made the universe and the ways he works through it now (despite the efforts of his fallen creatures to spoil it). God loves us and has given us a space where we can flourish. Keeping his commandments is our loving response to his plans. If we worship other gods or covet others’ goods, we’re not going to be rejoicing in God’s love, but if we abide in God’s love (v. 10), we will find that we have kept his commandments anyway. It’s a virtuous circle: if we need any tips for remaining in God, his commandments suggest some ways to behave. It’s the chicken-and-egg situation we were looking at earlier—love generates more love.

### Reflection

*‘God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God,  
and God abides in them’ (1 John 4:16).*

## A golden circle of love

‘No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.’

Following on from yesterday’s reading, this rightly celebrated passage is surely one of the ultimate ‘words of commitment’. It has comforted millions of bereaved people with the thought that the sacrifices of the dead have not been made in vain.

It is useful to see the verse in the context of the unity of love and keeping commandments that we looked at yesterday. We can join with God in creating a community of love, remaining in his ways and being his friends. Jesus hammers home the point about it not being a case of doing what we’re told: instead of being servants, we’re friends; we share in what we do.

From this, we can see that it’s not so much a matter of our deciding to be friends with God—as if we were to pick him out one day from a group of others—rather, he has created us, loved us and chosen a special path for us. This is a path that dovetails perfectly with the gifts God has given us and is the setting in which we can truly shine. This give-and-take is so beautifully balanced that we will bear fruit and ask him for just the right things (v. 16). We work with God in this finely tuned reciprocal sharing. It is a golden circle of commitment and love.

### Reflection

*The self is not lost when it is surrendered to Christ. It is lost in a higher will, redeemed from a self-centred will, and found again in obedience to that higher will. So it all ends in self-affirmation. The self is not cancelled—it is heightened.*

E. Stanley Jones, *The Word Became Flesh* (Abingdon, 1963)

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## Sustained by his body

Jesus said to them, ‘Very truly, I tell you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day; for my flesh is true food and my blood is true drink. Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.’

It is crunch time. This passage comes when the disciples and the crowds following Jesus are finally starting to get the idea behind his teaching. Of course, they misunderstand some aspects and with other parts of it, they can’t get their heads round the revolutionary nature of his message.

Here we can get to grips with the idea of living in Jesus. As we have seen, the good news is that he helps us. It’s not a lonely commitment to an idea, but a joining in with a loving relationship. Now we can look more closely about how this can be sustained. We carry on in this relationship, this community of love, because Jesus feeds us. He provides sustenance with his own body, given for us. This is true food, which keeps us going through thick and thin.

That is why it’s so important for us to worship, pray, read, meet with people who reflect God and share in services of Holy Communion. Communion is the love of God made real and physical—a gift we can see, touch and taste.

Joining in this feast makes us a part of our Lord’s body; by eating the body of Christ, we become the body of Christ. As Augustine of Hippo said about taking and becoming this body, ‘If you have received well, you are that which you have received’, or, as we might even say, ‘You are what you eat.’

### Prayer

*Grant us therefore, gracious Lord, so to eat the flesh of your dear Son Jesus Christ and to drink his blood, that our sinful bodies may be made clean by his body and our souls washed through his most precious blood, and that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us.*

Service of Holy Communion, *Common Worship*  
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## ‘You are the Holy One of God’

‘But among you there are some who do not believe.’ For Jesus knew from the first who were the ones that did not believe... Because of this many of his disciples turned back and no longer went about with him. So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’ Simon Peter answered him, ‘Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.’

Here, Jesus moves on to develop what the impact of his message can be. It’s a message that demands a response, one way or the other, so it’s only to be expected that some people turn away. The big problem is our indifference.

Jesus seems to have been particularly tough on people’s lack of commitment—hardly the beard-and-sandals ‘pale Galilean’ of folklore. ‘No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God’, he advised potential followers (Luke 9:62). With all his love and forgiveness, he can deal with the questions, misunderstandings and enthusiasm of his disciples, but people’s refusal to choose his path offers him nothing to go on.

In place of the ‘whatever’ shrug of indifference, Peter offers a thrilling restatement of what he has committed to: ‘You have the words of eternal life’. Of course, Peter goes on to deny Jesus, but he is the supreme example of a disciple who shows that commitment means keeping going and trying again after failure. Harking back to the themes we considered yesterday—about joining in Jesus’ body through Communion (the Eucharist)—Timothy Radcliffe OP writes, ‘Jesus had promised that his Father and he would make their home with the apostles, and this is now achieved [at the end of the Gospels]. The Eucharist is our home, whatever we have done and been... God accepts our limited, fragile forgetful loves if that is all that we have to offer him now. If there is a place for Peter, who denied Jesus, then there are places for us all’ (*Why Go to Church?*, Continuum, 2008).

### Reflection

*Which of your fears are preventing you from being committed to the Holy One of God?*

## The commissioning of the disciples

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

Sometimes, when we're bogged down in our fears and anxieties, we need the reassurance of these words: ‘I am with you always.’ As we saw on Tuesday, we need to remind ourselves of the way that the universe is formed by God and ruled by love. This isn't a sentimental gush of emotions, but the steadfast, long-term commitment of being joined in a community of sharing. We were created specifically for this. As we saw in Deuteronomy at the start of these readings, God has promised himself to us. It is only our selfishness that stops us keeping our promises to him.

That is why daily prayer is so vital. It's both a basic acknowledgment of our place in the universe and an exchange of love with our Creator. We have a fundamental need to offer ourselves up to our Father each day, to renew the bonds of affection and faith.

If this seems like a hard task, we could recall what we learned earlier about its being an act of love shared with God. It is God who prays within us: ‘Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words’ (Romans 8:26).

The whole point is that we are becoming part of something bigger, joining with the God who loves us.

### Reflection

*We are sure He cares far more to make the best of us, and to do the most through us, than we have ever cared ourselves... That He really wants us, and needs us, is the wonder and strength of our life.*

A.W. Robinson, *The Personal Life of the Clergy* (Longmans, Green, 1902)

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