

7<sup>th</sup> January 2018

Preacher: Jen Smith

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**Hymns:** 677 Christ is made the sure foundation  
331 King of kings, majesty  
549 Come let us use the grace divine  
545 Be thou my vision  
564 O thou who camest from above

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**Readings:** Deuteronomy 29.10-15  
Jeremiah 31.31-34  
Romans 12.1-2  
Mark 14.22-25

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**“Taken, blessed, broken, shared”**

There are lots of things we might have to say, this covenant Sunday – among them the reminders that our although our covenant prayer is about radical self-abandonment, it is not about becoming God or anyone else's doormat, that we make this covenant with all the people around us in this world, not just the ones in this church, that living to God will make us a bit strange, but not pull us out of the world into a holy huddle: any number of good Covenant messages.

Go read those passages again, and think about the prayers we offer today – but what I'd like to reflect on this New Year is something less obvious, but at the heart of our readings, and our covenant: and that is the subject of happiness – blessing, if you will.

Try if you will, think of a time in your life when you were or are most happy. Maybe a snapshot, blink of an eye – maybe a whole space of years that together add up to happiness, and you only realise after the fact?

We all want it, some of us have it? Others of us never do – fortunes are made telling us about it and giving us habits and actions which can help us achieve it – happiness.

I hear too that the government is intensely interested in measuring and increasing our happiness, because it follows that when we are happy, we spend more, complain less, and tend to thank our politicians? And if in our happy glaze we do manage to vote at election time, we are meant to be less likely to vote someone out.

Apparently if we are a little unhappy we buy more of certain things – comfort food, relatively inexpensive escapist treats – according to the Guardian newspaper, the BBC, and even Marie Claire magazine (which I am far too old to read – but I've heard) the last economic downturn saw a boom in gin and lipstick sales in the UK? Relatively small, escapist treats?

But of course it is mre complicated than this - if we are not just a little unhappy, but very unhappy we spend and vote in unpredictable ways which may even be harmful to us, just to try something different. Anything better than what we have now?

A while ago I got a bank circular with four things which promised if I did them, to get my year off to a brighter start. I'm not proud, I ripped that envelope open – the four things were: plan your next holiday, brighten up your home, shop in the sales – and the 4th of course, do all this with the help of this bank's loans, insurance, and travel money. All fine things in themselves. And I may have done one or two of them already – you may have too –

But the problem with those four things is that they are all in the end about distracting, evading, escaping 'real life,' which I guess is the point?

Here's the thing, sometimes 'real life' is hard. Needs brightening. But it has this going for it, it is real. And being in covenant with God is about being real and being part of other people's real life to make it better. Actually better. Warm instead of cold. Fed instead of hungry. Laughing and free instead of anxious. Able to worship and love and work without fear of violence.

Not quite one week ago on the first morning of the new year, a young man was knifed to death about a quarter mile from here, just north of Old Street roundabout. He was one of four young men killed with a knife in that 48 hours.

Real life is hard. But the Covenant we renew today is about more than just brightening it!

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks, and broke it, and gave it to his disciples – this is my body. Same way – with the wine, he took it, gave thanks, offered it, and they drank. This is the blood of the covenant (or new covenant) which is poured out for many. So says Jesus, in our Gospel.

Jesus also did 4 things. Take, bless, break or offer, and share or drink.

I want to suggest this Covenant that these 4 things, if we do them consistently, and come back to them when we feel lost, and keep coming back to them and with other people - they will make a habit of joy – the awareness of blessing no matter what is going on around us, and in the midst of both good days and bad. Real life.

I am convinced that joy, blessing – which is translated as happiness in many of our bibles – is indeed what God wants for us, and for those we meet in this world!

And this changes real life.

But this is not the kind of change or miracles that you can read about on some church websites – where you are encouraged to give 100 pounds or dollars as a 'first fruit' to 'activate' God's promise for you – I'm quoting the website of one of the pastors who prayed at my President's inauguration last year.

Before our treasurers panic, giving to church is no bad thing – no more than doing the 4 things as my bank circular suggested to brighten the year – which to remind you were in order, planning my next holiday, indulging in the sales, or improving my house – all while taking up the offer of a loan, insurance or travel money –

But blessing is more than just a series of lucky escapes - it is about living in real life, with others, aware of God's love and involved in making this love real 'manifest' is the scripture word – for all people.

If this were not true, if happiness is just about keeping as much distance between myself and hurt as I can, then I have problems.

First, this would make the pursuit of happiness into an obstacle race – how many of life's bullets can I dodge! If I manage to get through without getting my heart broken, can I stay healthy? If I manage to stay healthy enough, can I get a good job that pays enough to live and I can stand doing? Can I avoid getting made redundant? And if I do all that, can I just swing it to have terrific children, the kind people envy, and have them get through school without bullying, and get top marks so they can go to university and get a job that will help them in their turn dodge as many bad things as they can? 'I just want them to be happy,' I say.

And second, if happiness is just about keeping as much distance between myself and hurt as I can, then the sensible thing is to put other people's suffering as far away from myself as possible – simply to clean up the street and push it elsewhere.

Hurt is horrible – so avoiding it makes sense – but happiness, blessing, is more than a just series of 'lucky escapes.'

Now I write the law in your heart, says God in Jeremiah – think about this – the law not on the outside beating or judging us, but in the threads of the muscle that pumps our life, lets us run, love, shout – blessing is law written in our deepest selves and actually in our bodies.

Back to those 4 things Jesus did: with bread and wine with his disciples – take it up, give thanks, break or offer, share or pour out.

To get a habit of blessing, I try to think in terms of being taken up by God the way bread is taken up. Claimed. Named and given purpose.

In Deuteronomy, we heard that we come to this covenant not just all the tidy folk, but women, and children, and foreigners – in other words like it or not, this covenant we make today doesn't just tie us to the good folk here in the room, but to those who would scorn what we're doing – those who are still in bed, those who are at work, those who don't even notice that church is open.

And this is us, gathered here, taken up together. And we give thanks together. For each other, and with each other – and not just with each other, but with folk we don't know and don't understand and whose reality might show ours up a bit – whose work in a garment factory might make me a little less happy to with my post Christmas sale bargain. That's what being taken up means.

Jesus then gave thanks. I don't think it is just that we should give thanks – we do, and we should – but that we remember that God gives thanks for us – loves and delights in us – yes just us!! Thanksgiving as a drip fed habit gives us perspective, and makes us aware that we are not on our own. Thanksgiving also helps us focus on

blessing without denying hard things, but in the midst of hard things. This is not about a culture of denial, but a culture of perspective, that helps us be at peace with ourselves in God's creation.

And we are not just taken and admired and put down, but we are changed by our worship and service, and study together – if we aren't, well there is something wrong – the 3<sup>rd</sup> thing Jesus did was to break the bread – to offer the wine, pouring it out. Friends a loaf that is not broken is not going to be able to be shared. Wine in the bottle won't be drunk by anyone. Be not conformed, but be transformed said our epistle. Be changed so as to be shared and offered one to another.

And then, Jesus shared the bread – drank the wine with them all. We offer ourselves to each other, we serve, we try, we love, we risk, we eat. This is real life.

I've suggested that meditating on the pattern of Jesus words in our own lives, letting ourselves be taken up and gathered, letting ourselves be given thanks over and loved – letting ourselves be changed, and letting ourselves be offered – that this is the pattern of covenant with God, and the pattern that leads to blessing – happiness. Joy.

It would be easier to send my 100 pounds and do the stuff on the bank circular, or make some kind of bargain with God but I have to keep doing it over and over to get the hit. And keep doing it, and it is exhausting, and even after all of it I'm still unlikely to survive this life.

I'd rather come to God's table, to eat and laugh and be full up.

This is blessing, these are miracles, here is covenant.