

I had prepared some other thoughts about this Covenant Service earlier,
But then I had conversations with many of you over the past few days,
And I realised that God needs us to hear a slightly different message today –
One that takes into consideration the difficult things that many of us are dealing with:
Serious illness, death, and even suicide of family members or close friends --
Whether this happened very recently or quite a while ago,
The rawness of the wound is often more apparent in difficult times.
Domestic violence and family dysfunction
At a time when our horizons have shrunk
To the confines of our locked-down/Tier 4 homes.
Loss of income, loss of meaningful work, loss of interactions with others
At a time when we often feel what we really need most is a hug and a cuddle!

We often think of Covenant Service as the time when we dress up in our best
And gather to make promises to God and each other –
But this year we're not really sure if God has been living up
To God's side of the bargain.
So some of us are not sure if we really want to sign up to this deal again.
We promised we would be good so that God would recognise our goodness
And make everything right for us.
Except we tried our best to be good – and it's not all 'right'.
And so we struggle again to reconcile
How a Good God can allow bad things to happen to good people.

Some of us were more than gleeful to take down the 2020 calendar from the wall
And toss it in the bin (one person confided that she stomped on it first!).
As if there was something about that revolution of our earth around the sun
That was inherently evil –
And now that we've got a new number up on the wall,
Everything will be better.
Except it's not. At least not in the way we think it should be.

So perhaps it's even more important that we do gather today – albeit virtually –
To reconsider the Covenant promises.
In the first place, they really don't ask us to promise that we're going to be 'good'
Or that our goodness is the reason God is going to make everything good for us.
What we promise is that we will accept God's purpose for us:
To love and serve God in all our life and work –
That is to work with God for all that is good and right and true –
And that God will be with us
Through all the difficult times and the good times.
We're in this together.
God and God's people working together for all that is good and right and true.

It's a bit like the wedding vows: "for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer,
in sickness and in health -- to love and to cherish..."
Except that in this case of our Covenant, our relationship doesn't end in death
But goes on for all eternity.
God's love and God's presence continues with us, especially in the difficult times.

The cross that has become the symbol of our faith
Reminds us that the God we worship and follow
Was not afraid to enter into the most horrific human suffering
But was able to transform that suffering into victory.

As a friend reminded me years ago:
God is good, and, in the end, everything will be good.
If it's not good now, it's not the end.

==

And so we join together again today to renew this Covenant,
This annual ritual that reminds us that God is still our God
That we are still God's people,
Encouraged and entrusted to do what is Good and Right and True.

The fact that we're sharing in this Covenant Service from our own homes
Reminds us – as has the past year's circumstances --
That we can no longer leave 'church things', like Covenant promises,
In a particular building on Sunday
But Covenant promises become part of our everyday life.

The Jeremiah reading reminds us that God's promises are to be 'written on our hearts'
That daily, ordinary lives are to be sacred;
That the homes where we eat and sleep and wash and work
And play and read and watch tv and phone friends and send emails
Are to be the places where we encounter God at work with us
The places where God has work for each of us to do on behalf of God's kingdom.

The Deuteronomy text lists that people God is calling us to be in community with:
"the leaders of your tribes, your elders, and your officials,
all the men of Israel, your children, and your women..."
In the year we've just finished, we've been reminded of the need to consciously reach out
to those of our congregations who are particularly isolated during the pandemic;
We have learned to phone each other more regularly
Even as we've learned to zoom and chat to faces on screens.
We've recognised again that 'community' doesn't just happen by accident.
It takes intent; it takes effort.

The Deuteronomy text has reminded us to widen that understanding of community
To include 'the aliens who are in your camp,
both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water'.
Perhaps for us today that would include the delivery drivers,
The staff who work at home or behind the scenes to keep things going.
Those who have continued to show up for work when most of us have stayed at home.
Teachers who are never sure whether they'll be teaching in person or online...
These too can be part of the Covenant: working for all that is good and right and true
For all of us.
Reminding us that our 'community' is bigger than our gathered congregation
And our 'Christian presence' is more than our bricks and mortar.
That when we have focused too much on 'gathering in person for worship'
We have missed the essence of having God's covenant 'written on our hearts.'

Over the past 9-10 months, I've heard from several who had not 'been to church'

In quite a while, but felt the need to reconnect, to be part of the community again.
I wonder if we who are 'in the community' have felt the same urge to reconnect?

If not, why? If so, what have we done about it?

Might this year's Covenant remind us of our responsibility to reach out,

To remind others that God's promises are for all us of wherever we are?

Our Methodist Connexion is encouraging us to personally – and with others –

Consider what's now known as the 'Methodist Way of Life' –

A simple, methodical set of questions that we are to engage with on a regular basis:

Questions about how Worship: when and how we have recently felt close to –

Or far away from – God... about worship 'written on our hearts'...

Questions about Learning and Caring: how we've practiced generosity,

Or how we're taking care of ourself in difficult times...

Questions about Service: caring for creation, addressing injustice,

using our financial resources wisely

Questions about Evangelism: how we find opportunities – even in lockdown! –

To share our faith with others....

In all these areas, many have noted that God has been at work during this pandemic—

Often in ways that we might not have noticed if everything had been 'normal'...

I want to close this not-normal Covenant meditation by sharing a 'pandemic blessing'

That's come to Union Street in the shape of a person

Who took it upon herself to reach out –

She was new to Maidstone, having moved in to a flat near Union Street for work
at the beginning of the first lockdown... not knowing anyone in the town!

As she passed by the church on her way to her new job,

She noted it was a Methodist church and she found a way to be in touch.

Amy has since been a regular attender at our online services

And the After-Church Chats,

and has even gone through a Membership Class on zoom.

Amy and I have never met in person, but she will be confirmed as a Methodist

Later in this morning's service.

If you had told me this story a year ago, I might not have believed you,

But God is bigger than our understandings of how things must be

And braver than our comfortable habits or our notions of 'right' and 'proper':

God is ever willing to lead us on to new and daring ways

To be a people in Covenant with Godself, with our congregations,

With all those in our communities.

As we each separately and all together – as a circuit! – join in the Covenant today,

We consider again how God is calling us to work with God and each other –

To use our God-given talents and gifts to work for good and against evil --

To be aware of the new challenges God is asking us to face

Of the new things is God doing in our midst –

and how best might we share that love and hope and promise with others.

Our God is not limited by a pandemic or evil forces:

Our God is alive and well and working in our midst

And invites us to work together for all that is good and right and true. Amen.