

Covenant 2024 -- circuit online 7th January 2024 Bonni-Belle Pickard

Pre-service music:

Be Still for the Presence of the Lord – StF 20

Behold the servant of the Lord – StF 546

Lord, you have come to the seashore – StF 558

I am no longer mine (Matt Beckingham),

==ORDER OF SERVICE ==

Call to worship

Great is thy faithfulness – StF 51

Prayer – Methodist Worship Book, 282ff

Jeremiah 31:31-34

Lord, you have my heart – StF 559

Romans 12:1-2

Beyond these walls of worship – StF 547

Intro to Covenant (Methodist Worship Book, p 285)

Meditation – BBP

Take my life and let it be – StF 566

Confessions – Methodist Worship Book 285-6

Come, let us use the Grace Divine – StF 549

Covenant Prayer – Methodist Worship Book 287-9

O Jesus, I have promised – StF 563ii (HATHEROP CASTLE)

Intercessions – – Methodist Worship Book 290-1

O Thou Who Camest – StF 564

Jeremiah 31: 31-34

The days are surely coming, says the LORD,
when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—
a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the LORD.
But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel
after those days, says the LORD:
I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts;
and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.
No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other,
'Know the LORD', for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest, says the LORD;
for I will forgive their iniquity and remember their sin no more.

Romans 12:1-2

I appeal to you, therefore, brothers and sisters,
By the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice,
holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.
Do not be conformed to this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of your minds,
so that you may discern what is the will of God –
what is good and acceptable and perfect.

'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.'

'The covenant was renewed in Jesus Christ our Lord,
In his life, work, death, and resurrection.
In him all people may be set free from sin and its power,
And united in love and obedience.

In this covenant, God promises us new life in Christ.
For our part we promise to live not for ourselves but for God.

We meet, therefore, as generations have met before us,
To renew the covenant which bound them
And binds us to God.'

==

Covenant Prayer (Methodist Worship Book pages 287 to 289)

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
let us again accept our place within this covenant
which God has made with us and with all who are called to be
Christ's disciples.

This means that, by the help of the Holy Spirit,
we accept God's purpose for us,
and the call to love and serve God
in all our life and work.

Christ has many services to be done:
some are easy, others are difficult;
some bring honour, others bring reproach;
some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests,
others are contrary to both;
in some we may please Christ and please ourselves;
in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves.
Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who
strengthens us.

Therefore let us make this covenant of God our own.
Let us give ourselves to him,
trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

Eternal God,
in your faithful and enduring love
you call us to share in your gracious covenant in Jesus Christ.
In obedience we hear and accept your commands;
in love we seek to do your perfect will;
with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.
We are no longer our own but yours.

**I am no longer my own but yours.
Your will, not mine, be done in all things,
wherever you may place me,
in all that I do
and in all that I may endure;
when there is work for me
and when there is none;
when I am troubled
and when I am at peace.**

**Your will be done
when I am valued
and when I am disregarded;
when I find fulfilment
and when it is lacking;
when I have all things,
and when I have nothing.**

**I willingly offer
all I have and am
to serve you,
as and where you choose.**

**Glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
you are mine and I am yours.
May it be so for ever.
Let this covenant now made on earth
be fulfilled in heaven. Amen.**

Each year as I go through the Covenant Service with my churches,
I'm struck by the words of these opening paragraphs,
 Words about 'covenant' and 'holiness' and 'chosen-ness.'
And I always tell myself, 'I need to go back and explore them further.'
This year I'm going to do just that!

The word Covenant is, of course, an agreement between two parties –
 That each will support, defend, protect the other.
Some covenants are between two equal parties – others between a stronger and weaker party.
 Because a covenant gives responsibility to both parties,
 It needs to be reviewed regularly – each side recognising their parts.

The original Covenant – or Covenants -- was originally made between God and Israel –
 There were covenants between God and various persons:
 Noah, Abraham, Moses, David...

In simple terms, in the Covenant with Noah
 God promised never again to seek to destroy the earth or its creatures
 Because God has recognised Noah's faithfulness.

God's covenant with Abraham concerned granting Abraham descendants --
 Who would be 'God's people'.

In the Covenant with Moses, God promised to take the Hebrew people
 Out of slavery in Egypt and bring them to a Promised Land.

God also gave Moses the Ten Commandments
 Which set the boundaries for how God's people were to relate to God and each other.

The Covenant with David was about ensuring a future Messiah to rule God's people
 With justice and into peace.

A later understanding of Covenant was the one we've heard from the prophet Jeremiah:
 That the Covenant was one made not only with the group but with individuals.

As Christians, we have understood Jesus to be the fulfilment of those covenants
 And that, through Jesus, the covenant was also extended to his followers.

In each of these covenants,
 the understanding was that God would support and protect God's people
 and God's people would honour God and God's ways of justice and peace.

In each of these covenant relationships, there were times of great difficulty.
 In essence, as the old song goes, God 'never promised you a rose garden.'
 Instead, God promised to be with God's people during the difficult times.
And the record from scripture is that God was remarkably consistent in faithfulness
 Even when God's people repeatedly turned away.

Because a Covenant is based on both parties' allegiance,
 A regular review of the agreement is needed.

That's why we do a Covenant service at least once a year:
 We look back at our relationship with God
 And consider God's faithfulness and our own...

A second word to explore briefly is 'chosen'.
Within the Covenant understanding, the Jewish people and then we Christians
 Have understood themselves/ourselves to have been 'chosen' by God.

Writer Kathleen Norris has some interesting observations on this 'chosen-ness' –
In her book, *Amazing Grace*, she wonders if being a 'chosen people'
Means *only some are chosen and others are left out* –
Often that is the interpretation of some –
For instance, the Jews were chosen, and the Gentiles were not...
Which we're currently seeing played out in catastrophic proportions
In the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza.
Within Christianity itself, historically, we've encountered a theology of Predestination
Which says that one's 'chosen-ness' is not related to one's ability or merit –
One is just chosen because God thinks they're special...
Which, again, might be fine for the chosen ones, but what about the rest?

The wording that I've read from the Covenant service a few moments ago
Doesn't indicate that the 'chosen-ness' is not exclusive –
*We understand that God 'chooses' all of us to be in Covenant with God –
It's up to us to decide whether we want to accept the Covenant relationship.*

In our contemporary world, many have opted out of such a covenant –
Many claiming that God hasn't always protected or supported them –
And they will most often point out they're own suffering as proof:
If God were all powerful, then they wouldn't have to suffer!
Of course, the suffering or not-suffering is not the point of the Covenant –
The suffering is assumed – in the sense of God suffering *with* God's people.
The Covenant is inviting us to suffer with God on behalf of the world and all creation –
Not to glorify suffering as such,
But to recognise it as a way in which good can triumph over evil.

So, in the sense that we can choose to suffer – and celebrate – with God,
Then, as Kathleen Norris points out, it's a privilege for God to choose us:
'Choosing to employ our weaknesses rather than our strength,
and our failures far more than our successes.'

She speaks of God choosing
'Abraham and Sarah, Moses, Jacob, Ruth, Jeremiah, Isaiah, Mary, and Jesus'
To wrestle with the hard realities of incorporating the divine into human life –
'contending with hard questions, thankless tasks, and usually a harrowing journey,
Which in Jesus' case leads to the cross.'

So, being 'chosen' is not so much an honour as a responsibility, a challenge...

And, in our Christian understanding,
it's not an exclusive invitation but open to all who are willing to accept.

==

Another misunderstanding is that Israel (and we) have often thought this Covenant to mean
That we could do what we like, and God would bless our actions.

But the Covenant is actually quite different:
God calls Israel (and us) to be *Holy* people –
That is, people who honour all that is good and right and true –
The godly things that are at the base, the root, the essence
Of who we are, how we were created, how we are meant to be.

For the ancient Hebrew people, that holiness became enshrined in the Law of Moses...

A Law that was, at its heart, based on holiness –
on all that was good and right and true –

a holiness that was especially meant to protect the most vulnerable in society –

Which is why God's Covenant people were called to 'find delight in the law' –

Though in reality, the Law was often mis-used and twisted
to bolster the desires of the enforcers...

The Law that had been enacted to protect and support justice was made 'unholy'

By those who ignored its original purpose.

God's people from the earliest ages, the holy ones: prophets, judges, mediators –

Have been tasked with ensuring that the law is just
And protects the most vulnerable in society.

Ensuring that the Law protects a sense of 'holiness'....

Holy things speak of the essence of God and God's goodness.

The Covenant means that we recognise and honour this goodness in God,

And we pledge ourselves to become more like God, more holy –

In return, God enables us to receive the 'fruits of the Spirit' (Galatians 5:22-23):

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In that sense, Love becomes our Law; not personal preference, not familial power,

But an understanding that looking out for the other,

Through patience and kindness and gentleness, becomes our ways of working.

Patience grows as we absorb God's sense of time –

Instead of chronological time – when things happen in a neat and expected order

And we feel in control because we know what to expect –

We live in God's *Kairos* time – when things happen when the time is 'right' –

Sometimes taking ages, sometimes happening in an unexpected split second.

Patience develops when we recognise that the 'arch of history' is long

But it arches towards goodness and justice

When, like Moses, we might not see the Promised Land,

But without our patience efforts, the larger group will not get there at all.

Kindness emerges from recognising the worth of others – and the struggle of others –

When we are too wrapped up in our own needs,

We can't see what is happening with others –

'Kindness' literally means that we recognise the similarity between ourselves and others

We are one 'kind' –

As one elderly woman in a former congregation put it:

'Everybody has their problems.'

We become 'kind' when we recognise the struggles of others

and we do what we can to help them along.

We become 'kind' when we recognise the successes of others

And we are able to celebrate with them

Instead of feeling resentful that our own efforts seem to be ignored.

Self-control emerges as we realise that the world does not revolve around our own demands –

That each of us has an innate worth –

but it is no larger or smaller than that of the others.

Self-control grows out of knowing that God loves each of us
And that is enough.

Gentleness becomes the tool we use with building our relationships.
Gentleness does not mean weakness –
The definition of a Gentleman is one who recognises his power
But uses it gently.

In the Law of Love, we each recognise the power we have
to work for what is good and right and true
and to do it in such a way that the other is free to accept our contribution –
much like the gentleness with which God offers the Covenant to us.

Generosity grows out of our awareness that God has given us so much –
More than we need –
So that we can share generously with others, as God has shared with us.

‘Faithfulness’ is a trait that the scriptures, especially the Old Testament,
Continually assign to God: faithfulness to what is Good and Right and True
Even when others are not.

Faithfulness can involve overlooking ‘bad behaviour’,
Knowing it to be a symptom of a problem lurking
Rather than an essential flaw ...

If we are created to be Holy, then we are created to be Good.
When we’re not Good, we need to find out why –
We are able to become faithful when we develop God’s ability
To look beyond the current difficulty into what can be

‘It will be good in the end, and if it’s not good now, it’s not the end.’

Peace is the product of gentleness, kindness, self-control, faithfulness...
It is not achieved by beating the other into submission.
It is not achieved by asserting our might...
It is achieved by helping ourselves and each other recognise and honour Goodness.

And Joy comes through Peace – and through working through the struggles
Into the Goodness, into the Holiness...

As I’ve said, this call, this offer from God, to be in a Covenant relationship with God,
Is an awesome privilege and responsibility.
In effect, God is offering us the opportunity to be a co-creator of God’s Peaceable Kingdom.
It’s not just a New Age mantra to ‘look within ourselves’ and ‘be all we can be’ –
It’s an invitation to be linked up with God and God’s power –
Which is, actually, a big relief –
We don’t have to just rely on what’s within us,
We have access to the power of the Spirit who created all of creation
Who is the source of all that is Good and Right and True.

The Covenant Prayer that continues in the Covenant liturgy
Speaks more specifically of this tapping-into the fullness of God.
We will be committing ourselves to listening hard to what God has for us to do –

What tasks God needs us to be involved with,
What relationships God needs us to repair,
What challenges God needs us to address.
Again, not that we can do any of this on our own,
And in fact, to do it on our own is to almost ensure failure!
Rather, we are to do it *with* God, listening carefully, every step of the way,
To what we are to do next,
With whom we are to share the task,
What small – or big – challenge needs to be addressed and when and how.

As much as it feels great to have done something ‘on our own’ –
It feels even better to have done it with God’s help!
To be part of something much bigger than ourselves!

It’s not easy in the beginning –
We either come with too much self-confidence or not enough.
Both can be disastrous.
We can also come with too much or too little confidence in God’s power –
That can also be disastrous!
The Covenant says we will be working with God –
And that is enough.

And though it’s not easy in the beginning
It does get easier with practice –
(though the tasks often get harder!)
Like the ancient Hebrews, we acknowledge that we need to go through this practice,
This ritual, this liturgy again year after year...
Thinking back each year to how we have moved forward since the past year –
Or recognising our shortcomings.
Realising that the task is never fully done,
But we keep moving forward – and onwards to perfection,
to the fullness of holiness within each of us
when we are connected to the God of goodness and truth and righteousness.
So be it with us, Amen.