

St John's service for 9th January 2022 Prepared by Tim Rogers and Adele Moorhouse

Welcome to worship with St John's Church. At a time still filled with so much uncertainty we look to the one who is unchanging, the one on whom we can depend - Jesus. We take the opportunity today to commit ourselves afresh to believing and trusting in him.

Song

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him; the Lord is his name.

Low at his feet lay thy burden of carefulness,
high on his heart he will bear it for thee,
Comfort thy sorrows, and answer thy prayerfulness,
Guiding thy steps as may best for thee be.

Fear not to enter his courts in the slenderness
Of the poor wealth thou wouldst reckon as thine;
Truth in its beauty, and love in its tenderness,
These are the offerings to lay on his shrine.

These, though we bring them in trembling and fearfulness,
He will accept for the name that is dear;
Mornings of joy give for evenings of tearfulness,
Trust for our trembling, and hope for our fear.

O worship the Lord in the beauty of holiness,
Bow down before him, his glory proclaim;
With gold of obedience and incense of lowliness,
Kneel and adore him; the Lord is his name.

John S B Monsell (1811-75)

Prayer

Glory be to you God our loving Father who created us and who continually watches over us. We praise you God for you have loved us with an everlasting love and given us hope through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Glory be to you Jesus, our Saviour who came to live amongst us in uncertain times when there was little peace. Jesus who experienced life as we do and was subject to its trials and temptations and yet remained without sin. Jesus, who proclaimed the goodness of the kingdom and was even prepared to suffer and die so that our sins could be forgiven. Thank you Jesus, that you were raised to new and everlasting life which we are invited to share if we would only trust in you.

Glory be to you Holy Spirit, who breathes life into us and confirms us as members of the body of Christ, the family of God. Thank you Holy Spirit that you teach us, empower us and guide us as we journey through this life.

Glory be to you Father, Son and Holy Spirit - you call us into relationship with you and make that possible through your mercy and grace. Help us today to draw near to you in faith and trust and to renew our response and commitment to you, through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen**

Readings

Jeremiah 31:31-34

“The days are coming,” declares the Lord,
“when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.

It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,”
declares the Lord.

“This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel
after that time,” declares the Lord.

“I will put my law in their minds
and write it on their hearts.

I will be their God,
and they will be my people.

No longer will they teach their neighbour,
or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest,”
declares the Lord.

“For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more.”

John 15:1-10

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love.

Sermon

But this is the Covenant that I will make ... 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.” Jeremiah 31.33

In 1755 John Wesley produced a service that was the forerunner of the Covenant service now used by many, not just Methodists, that we celebrate today. The idea was not original to Wesley (it is a deeply biblical theme as we explore in the reading from Jeremiah); he took much from Puritans of the preceding century, but he was the main

source in creating this once a year reflection and commitment. Over his lifetime it was reformed and developed and different branches of Methodism had different forms. The version we use today describes itself as contemporary as opposed to the traditional text that many of us were brought up with, but Adele and I noted in our preparation even this so called contemporary version will sound archaic to many.

The whole service, forms around the notion of a covenant (that is an agreement like a trading contract or perhaps more appropriately a marriage) between God and us, God's people. It is not an agreement among equals. The two parties bring very different things to the agreement. Firstly we reflect on what God has done for us in Christ. We do not deserve the love God has for us –that is not the deal; nor can we 'pay' for God's love by our obedience or good works –that is not our side of a bargain either. God's love is unconditional. However there is our side to the agreement, and we need to prepare for and consider that. Having reflected on God's amassing love, we come to the second element in the service, our penitence. We are aware we fall short of God's standards and we do wish to say sorry and act accordingly. In a sense the desire to do that is even greater because we realise our being forgiven is not dependent on us confessing and acting in penitence as the caricature of Roman Catholic 'confession' would have it, but rather it is in response to the one who loves us so much and forgives so much. There is another aspect to this penitence; it prepares us for the third element of the service, what many in some senses rightly but in other senses wrongly see as the most significant part: our commitment to God.

Let us look at our readings and see how they help us understand this covenant and help us to prepare for our part of it.

Jeremiah speaks of 'A New Covenant', which Paul and Luke at least pick up on in relation to the Last Supper' ("This cup is the new covenant in my blood" 1 Corinthians 11.25) and other New Testament writers allude more generally to in the relationship which we have in Christ. For Jeremiah the new covenant is in contrast to the old covenant(s) between God and the people/individuals that we read of in the Old Testament. There is for example the covenant with Noah; and then the covenant with Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah, which is renewed not just with them but their immediate decedents too. It is not clear which of these might have been well known in Jeremiah's time but certainly none of them are what is chiefly in mind here. It is the covenant made in Sinai that is referred to –the law given on stone tablets. This was certainly not a covenant of equal parties either but certainly in the eyes of the prophet it was not an unconditional covenant –it required the people to keep up their side of the bargain. God would be their God, but they had to keep the Law. This they failed to do! So now Jeremiah says, the time is near for a new covenant.

Actually the deal is much the same: God will be their God, they will keep the Law. The difference is in the nature of the Covenant itself –God will write it on their hearts. We need to be careful how we hear that. To us the heart is usually the place of emotional response, but not in Hebrew thought –that would be the intestines (or gut as we still might say). No, in Hebrew thought the heart is the seat of the will or even reason. So this new covenant will be internalised not as an emotional response but as being reasonable and being

enabled to have the will to follow. This is emphasised by the fact that there will be no need to teach these things, it will be built in.

These ideas of course are figures of speech and it is not clear how literally they would come about, let alone how that might be. The Christian interpreter on the other hand might have something to say about that and so we turn to our other reading. Not only is God's side of the deal unconditional, God provides for us to keep our part too! The prophet envisions a way of living that is not trying and failing to obey externally imposed rules but recognising the way of God is reasonably within our very nature because of the nature of God. In Christ that is made explicit, not just an example or even *the* example to follow but actually Christ is the way. In the image of the True Vine we see how to be fruitful. It is by being attached to the vine and pruned appropriately. If we fail to acknowledge the unconditional love that is offered to us we separate ourselves from the very source of life and are not just fruitless but ultimately dead. If we accept it then not only are we ourselves fully nourished but even more, we are equipped to be disciples (verse 8).

So in the prayer that is at the heart of the Covenant service we seem to be making our commitment to God to offer ourselves completely to be used, or significantly not used, as God sees fit. In a very real sense that is what we are doing, but that is a limited sense. In fact we are acknowledging that that is the ultimate response to God's love for us. It is in laying our perceived self-interest aside that we may gain true fruitfulness. The prayer should not too easily be said, it is genuinely daunting if taken seriously, but neither should we be too scared to risk that we actually mean it, for God does not just provide the strength of will to mean it (the covenant written on our hearts) but we are actually joined to the very source of life (the true vine). Taking it seriously includes taking what might be the pruning aspects seriously too.

Let us look then at what it is we will be saying:

I am no longer my own but yours. Your will, not mine, be done in all things,

We begin as in the Lord's Prayer seeking God's will not our own; that will that is written in our hearts if only we acknowledge it. We go on to say that should be so in all circumstances and all places:

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.

This includes the fact that we may not have 'things' to do. For some the idea that just being might be what God requires of them and not continually doing might be an extremely difficult example of 'God's will not mine'. We go on in similar vein; that how we are perceived by others, and even self-satisfaction is of no importance:

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.

Finally we are bold enough to acknowledge, from where God started with us, that we are unconditionally loved, and as we wish to respond to be fully fruitful, that not only are we God's but God is ours –not captured by us –not ours in the sense of not being other peoples' God, but ours because we find ourselves by being lost in God:

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.

Prayers

There is a danger despite all this language of self-denial that actually this is all a bit self-centred. The prayer is “*I* am no longer *my* own but yours”, not “we ...”. Indeed all this is a personal commitment and each individual makes it for themselves but it is in a corporate act of worship (even if you are reading this alone). The covenant to which Jeremiah refers is for the people not individuals. The vine is a fruitful community, we are connected through Christ to one another.

So as we turn to our prayers for others we use the words from the covenant service (as you read or hear the general words, you may wish to hold specific people and situations before God and/or do so in the period of silence):

As we enter this covenant not for ourselves alone, but as God’s servants and witnesses, let us pray for the Church and for the World.

Loving God, hear us as we pray for your holy catholic Church:

Make us all one, that the world may believe.

Inspire and lead all who govern and hold authority in the nations of the world:

Establish justice and peace among all people.

Have compassion on all who suffer from any sickness, grief or trouble:

Deliver them from their distress.

We praise you for all your saints who have entered your eternal glory:

Bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray in silence for our needs and for those of others ...

Silence

Lord our God, you have helped us by your grace to make these prayers, and you have promised through Christ Jesus our Lord that when two or three agree in his name you will grant what they ask.

Answer your servants’ prayers according to their needs; in this world grant that we may truly know you, and in the world to come graciously give us eternal life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

Covenant

As we begin a new calendar year it is our custom to reaffirm our commitment to Jesus - surely the best new year resolution we could ever make.

We recognise again God’s readiness to enfold us in his generous love which is not dependent on our deserving, and we have the opportunity to commit ourselves once again in responding to that love.

We use a form of words that many others will be sharing at this time of year, to reaffirm the covenant in which God promises us new life in Christ and we promise to live no longer for ourselves but for God. Firstly we ask forgiveness for the sins that separate us from God.

God of mercy, hear us as we confess our sins.

We are sorry that we are often slow to learn from Jesus, reluctant to follow him, and fearful of what it will cost us. We are sorry that our worship is sometimes half-hearted and stilted, that there are times when we feel unable to join in fellowship and that we often hesitate to witness to all that Jesus has done for us. We are sorry that we sometimes misuse the gifts you have given us, evading our responsibilities and being poor stewards of your creation. God we are truly sorry for the sin that has made us unwilling to overcome evil with good, tolerant of injustice, quick to condemn, and selfish in sharing your love with others, and we ask your forgiveness now in Jesus' name. **Amen**

If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Therefore to all who truly repent this is his gracious word: 'Your sins are forgiven' - Thanks be to God. **Amen**

Let us now accept our place within the 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.

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

The words of our final song emphasise God's call on our lives and express our response, 'King of heaven, we will answer the call'.

Song

Hear the call of the kingdom lift your eyes to the king
Let his song rise within you as a fragrant offering
Of how God rich in mercy came in Christ to redeem
All who trust in his unfailing grace

Hear the call of the kingdom to be children of light
With the mercy of heaven the humility of Christ

Walking justly before him loving all that is right
That the life of Christ may shine through us

*King of heaven we will answer the call
We will follow, bringing hope to the world
Filled with passion, filled with power to proclaim
Salvation in Jesus' name*

Hear the call of the kingdom to reach out to the lost
With the Father's compassion in the wonder of the cross
Bringing peace and forgiveness and a hope yet to come
Let the nations put their trust in him

King of heaven...

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Blessing

Wherever there is sorrow, wherever there is fear, wherever there is need, reach out in the name of Jesus, the light of the world, and may his joy and peace, his healing and compassion dawn through you, until morning has broken and the day of his kingdom is here.

The Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord look on you with kindness and give you peace, this day and always. **Amen**

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CCL: 5347