

5th January 2020

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 224 As with gladness men of old
 549 Come, let us use the grace divine
 548 Blessèd assurance, Jesus is mine
 228 Hail to the Lord's Anointed
 564 O thou who camest from above

Readings: Deuteronomy 29:10-15
 Jeremiah 31:31-34
 Romans 12:1-2
 Mark 14:22-25

“Renewing the Covenant, 2020”

Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

In a few minutes, we are going to do that very Methodist thing, and renew our covenant together. Having heard the Scriptures read, and broken them together, we are going to pray the covenant prayer and re-commit ourselves to God.

And it is serious stuff – addressed to God – I am no longer my own, but yours. Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will; put me to doing, put me to suffering. let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you. exalted for you, or brought low for you; let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal. It would be worth having the prayer open in front of you – have a look at it – on pages 289 and 290 in the worship book.

And we can look at the phrases, and talk about what they mean, and what they don't mean – God never intends us to be a doormat, or to rest passively with a bad situation that we could change – you know that.

And we can hear the Scripture read and remember all the people who have said these words before, in this place, and those who will follow us.

We can ask what it means, the reminder from Deuteronomy that we are not just gathered with church elders and leaders, but also with our children and women.

What it means, that we are gathered (like it or not), with the aliens among us, the ones who carry our water and cut our wood, stock our supermarket shelves and work in our care homes and hospitals...

We can ask what it means, to talk about being a living sacrifice, not conformed to this world, but renewed by the transformation of our minds, as Paul wrote in Romans 12.

Most of all, we can ask and remember what it means to hear Christ's example in our Gospel – God broken to feed us, as we are transformed, our gifts shared to feed the world?

We can do all that, looking at these phrases. Do. Go and read the Scriptures, and think on them. They belong to you.

We can do all that. But the thing that strikes me, today, looking at the phrases of the Covenant prayer, is that right now in the life of this congregation gathered today, we have got them all covered.

There are those among us who are caught up in doing – those who are employed in all manner of tasks and chores, in the life of this church and outside it, and God knows we need them! There are those of us laid aside today. By the church, and by the world in which once we were so active, such impressive actors. There are those of us who are laid aside today.

There are those of us here, I promise you, who feel full of hope, and faith, and love – and those of us who are empty.

Among us, today, there are those who are suffering – in all manner of ways – and some have the kind of suffering that goes away after a while, and some have the kind of suffering that gets less sharp, but doesn't go away.

Together, we have got it covered, this covenant prayer, O yes, we have got it covered.

So hear this: wherever you are in yourself right now, you are not alone. God is with us, God has given us to each other, and to this place to live God's kingdom Now and here, in the present.

As individuals, we are pledging here not to wait until we have it all sorted out before we start this journey with God another year. Just as God isn't waiting for Methodism or any of her sister churches to become a perfect church before getting started with us, either. What if all our being, our situations – testified to Christ in us? Not just the good ones or easier ones?

In renewing the covenant, we are being asked to empty ourselves. To give up and over any identity in self, but rather discover ourselves in Christ. Labels, false selves – based on what we look like, or what we can do. Or where we are from.

Susanna Wesley wrote about this in her journal, where she recorded this prayer: “Save me from leading an imaginary life in the ideas of others, and so to be eager and forward in showing myself to the world.

Forbid that I should retain, improve, and adorn this fictitious being, while stupidly neglecting the true.”

And this is an odd thing, paradoxical, and might even be quite toxic - because sometimes churches have particularly asked those of us who don't fit whatever the norm is in our identity to be unobtrusive about it – to cause less disturbance. And that is not what this is about. We are not called to become appropriate, but to become Christ like.

Rather, this is about a reality which is paradoxical – that being open hearted with Christ, giving ourselves away in God as the Covenant prayer implies, leads us to be most fully and freely ourselves. In our full diversity of experience, and how we look and what our bodies are like and where we are from and all the rest.

I want to quote the theologian Timothy Radcliffe here – ‘The fear of many is that to become a committed Christian is somehow to turn into a plastic saint, inauthentic, inhuman, with a fixed smile and a pocketful of pious platitudes. One the contrary – it is the long and painful gestation of who you alone are called to be.’

Jesus was not like that, and he doesn't call us to be like that either. TO enter into the covenant is to enter into the conversation with God – offering our hope, our effort, our humour, our humility. And our anger – and expecting that God will involve us in the joyous conversation of creation.

SO take a moment right now, to check in with yourself – how are you? Are you feeling good about new year's resolutions, or have they already gone the way of all things? Where are you, with God? And to know God is with you.

Because today is also the feast of the Epiphany, when the rest of the churches not having covenant remember the wise men from the East – to whom God reveals Jesus' birth. Today is all about God revealing God's self in scripture, in the sacrament, and (on purpose), in other people around us in our full diversity.

Renewing the Covenant touches us in deeply personal ways, but we do not make it in private. We come together – like it or not, hope and warts and joys and stress, and love and tiredness and all of it, we come together to make this prayer.

And we make it too on each other's behalf. Sometimes the most surprising help comes, by leaning on each other – if we are open, and alive in our conversation with God – waiting on God.

Timothy Radcliffe again - he tells the story of one of his brothers, a fellow monk called Vincent who was from birth could not see. Vincent told the joking story on himself about a particular day when he had been visiting Liverpool, a city he did not know. If you have been, you know how busy the road is, outside the station.

Vincent approached a busy street to try to cross – with his white stick prominent – and finding himself next to someone else on the street, asked if they could cross the street together. The man next to him agreed eagerly, taking his arm. And so they together stepped off across the street – and crossed, successfully – to the sound of screeching brakes and horns. When they reached the other side, Brother Vincent said to the man, ‘thank you for helping me,’ to which his companion replied in some surprise – ‘no, thank you for helping me: I am blind!’

Please do not take this as instruction to be anything less than fully safe crossing streets!!

The point in telling the story is that renewing our covenant is not about just doing a spring clean of our own souls. It is not about a private piety or pulling our socks up to finally get better. It is about allowing God to minister to us, and becoming ministers to one another, and expecting that to take us to some surprising relationships.

Catherine of Siena recorded God's intention this way: 'I could well have supplied each of you with all your needs, material and spiritual. But I wanted to make you dependent on one another so that each of you would be my minister, dispensing the gifts and graces you have received from me.'

Full, empty, exalted, low, employed and laid aside, we are all part of what God is doing here. This is not just that to say it is ok how we are – we are tolerated - but that we are all necessary as part of God's vision here. And this prayer, this covenant will not let us forget it. We stand together, with God.

But, we are not here for ourselves, not here for Wesley's Chapel, or for Methodism in this country, or even that thing we call the global Methodist family – we are here to spread news of the God who stands beside us in our good times as in our bad, we are here to be a place where all rank and call of people may grow in grace, may know the security and challenge of faith in the God who came among us and let his body be broken that we might have life.

SO we are here in its most basic to do the work that we celebrate in our pastoral leaders – not tasks and agendas, but awareness. Looking to see who might be at the roadside with us ready to cross.

As I look to our future here, and particularly our hopes – our dreams - I remember this. I am no longer our own, but belong to God.

And in the progress we make, I dare say there will be days when we feel very full, and very empty, days when we feel like will bring us all things, and days when we feel like they will bring nothing.

My hope is, that as we journey together, we journey for God's kingdom, not the ones we build on our own. And I have seen you dare to stand before God and put all we have on the table for the renewing mission in this place. Not for ourselves, but for God.

And we won't be all of a mind, all the time – this is not God's intention! but we will come together – and we will build with each other, in God's grace, as we do today.

So however you are today – wherever the words of the Covenant prayer find you, have courage to pray it. Be gentle with yourself, and know that you, with us, God is only beginning.