

The Vine at Home

Covenant Service

These resources are based on The Methodist Covenant Service – which was shown live on Sunday 17th January on YouTube and is available to watch back here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pNTtLXcKCWo>

Call to worship

Jeremiah 31:33-34

³³ 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. ³⁴ 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.¹

Hymn: 645 STF – Will Your Anchor Hold

Opening Prayers

Loving God, as you bring us together to worship and sing, to pray and praise, to learn and reflect.

[Pause]

Loving God, we come today because being part of this worshipping community gives rhythm to our week.

We come to say our Covenant Prayer, to commit ourselves to you, and to take up a way of life that will bring us closer to you, and bring about a better world.

So therefore, let all of your people who try to be faithful disciples of Jesus offer prayer and praise to you. We come, come Lord Jesus.

Amen.²

We say together the Lord's Prayer

Readings: Romans 8:35, 37-39

³⁵ Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.³

Mark 14: 22-25 The Institution of the Lord's Supper

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² Opening Prayers written by Tim Baker

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22 While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, "Take; this is my body." **23** Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. **24** He said to them, "This is my blood of the^a covenant, which is poured out for many. **25** Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God."⁴

Reflections on the readings

Gracious God, as we come to your word we pray:
open up your word to our hearts and our hearts to your word, so
that you may change us. Amen.

What exactly are we doing in a Covenant Service?

I think we are doing at least three things: first, we remind ourselves of our covenant with God. Second, we encourage ourselves by the Providence of God. And third, we submit ourselves to the service of God.

Let's look at those in more detail. We remind ourselves, firstly, of our covenant with God.

We must not lose sight of the wonderful privilege it is to be in relationship to God. A relationship not primarily based on my faithfulness, my goodness or understanding, but rather on God's faithfulness, goodness and grace. So whatever comes our way, whatever tragedy or trauma, failing or sin, complexity or conflict, one thing is sure: we belong to God, and God to us.

That's the nature of a covenant relationship. It's this new covenant to which Jeremiah looked, a covenant written on the heart. And there's nothing that can change it.

Having reminded ourselves of our covenant with God, and God with us, we encourage ourselves by the Providence of God.

The covenant service is an interesting piece of theology. It celebrates our trust that God is in control and has a plan and a purpose for us, and for the world. It celebrates also our belief that God's plan is for our deepest and most joyful good. Therefore, whatever God asks of us, we will do. However, let's be honest, when we look around at the world, and indeed at the church, it's sometimes difficult to believe that God is in control. When we've been in the grip of a global pandemic for a year. When unarmed black people are killed in the street, or at home in bed as Breonna Taylor was. When innocent civilians are gunned down by extremists in Vienna and hundreds killed by Boko Haram in Nigeria.

Is God in control, really?

When increasing numbers in Britain rely on foodbanks each week to survive. When, in this country alone, tens of thousands have died from Covid, and millions are in local lockdown as

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we speak. The Covenant Service seeks to remind us that despite appearances to the contrary, God is, indeed, in control.

We worship Christ crucified, the Christ who appeared to be overcome, when he was unjustly executed. But who rose from the dead, who ascended to heaven, and whose return we continue to await. It is in his providence that we dare to hope. And because of our hope in Christ Jesus, in a world that is in so many ways screwed up and messed up, we nonetheless see signs of beauty, holiness and hope.

We're humbled by those who put themselves in harm's way in the fight against the pandemic. We're encouraged by the neighbourliness and community spirit that lockdown unlocked. We're amazed by the international cooperation that enabled the accelerated development of a vaccine in ten months, that would otherwise have taken ten years. We're surprised by our capacity to adapt to unanticipated and unprecedented change.

Despite the ugliness of much that is going on in the world, we also see the providence of God, and the purposes of God, at work. And this encourages us. That God might just know what He's doing in the world. And, therefore, might just know what She's up to in our lives.

Today, we remind ourselves of our Covenant with God. We encourage ourselves by the Providence of God. And, finally, we submit ourselves to the service of God.

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

I find this statement inspiring and intimidating in equal measure. Because, to be fair, I want to please Christ, but I also want to please myself too. I'm happy to serve Christ in areas of my natural inclinations. But less happy, when it is contrary to those or my material interests. To serve Christ when it brings honour is easy, but we are less keen when it brings reproach. The Covenant Service today is a re-invitation to submit ourselves to the service of God, afresh.

And this is not only relevant to 'church jobs'. You know, whether you'll serve as treasurer, or steward, whether you'll be a deacon or elder, pastoral visitor, junior church teacher, youth pastor. This is equally relevant to your career choices, or how you spend retirement. Are you only interested in the roles which bring status, and honour, and reward? Or are you equally open to the roles that are less obviously rewarding, but might just be where God needs you to make a difference?

Many of you know that we as a family spent a number of years living and working in the north east of England, in County Durham, and on the edge of Newcastle upon Tyne. It's a part of the country where Methodism has historically had a very strong and deep presence. One of the reasons for this is, because back in the mid-1700s, around the time that the Covenant Service was being developed in Methodism, John Wesley and the Methodists targeted Newcastle and it became their northern hub. And they chose Newcastle, not because it was a great place to be, or a strategic location: at the time, it was neither. They

targeted Newcastle because it contained, at that time, some of the areas of greatest social deprivation in the country. They went there, because they believed that is where they were needed most. So they concentrated their energies and efforts in and around that city and region for generations.

Today, we remind ourselves of our Covenant with God. We encourage ourselves by the Providence of God. And we resubmit ourselves to the service of God. Christ indeed has many services to be done, both inside and outside the church. To which ones will we submit ourselves, this Covenant Sunday?

Amen.⁵

The Covenant Prayer - *Take time to sit quietly. Then say the Covenant Prayer aloud.*

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.

What are you being called to?

As part of our Covenant Sunday, we begin a new segment of The Vine at Home resources, which will run right through to Vocations Sunday on 2nd May. During each of these sections, we will have a few moments to reflect on our own sense of calling – what is it that God is asking of us today, this week, this month, and beyond?

“God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” John 4:24.

Two questions for you to ponder, as we leave a few moments of quiet,

- 1) Think about a time when you experienced the presence of God vividly in worship: what was it that made that time special?
- 2) In what ways could you be involved in enabling people have an opportunity to meet with God?

⁵ Reflection written by Calvin Samuel

[You might like to play some music whilst people think and/or make notes].

Prayers of intercession

Sit in a comfortable position with feet on the floor and take two or three deep breaths. Relax each part of your body. Be aware of any sounds around you and focus on the sound of your breathing. Be still and know that God is with you.

Keep a moment of silence

Listen for the good news that God wants you to hear today.

Is it forgiveness for past wrongs? Hope for the future? Healing for a loved one? Joy in knowing that God is your rock and that salvation comes to you through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Listen, the kingdom of God is near.

Keep a moment of silence

Listen for good news that God offers those who are in pain: those who hunger and thirst, those who suffer grief and loss, those who are homeless, injured or living in war zones. Thank God for those who reach out with love and care, offering hope and hospitality, healing and reconciliation. Listen, the kingdom of God is near.

Keep a moment of silence

Listen for Christ's call on your life today. Hear his invitation to follow, to get involved, to trust the one who said 'I am the way, the truth and the life. Follow me.'

The kingdom of God is near.

Amen.⁶

Hymn: 707 STF – Make me a channel of your peace

Blessing

May we go with the courage of Christ in our hearts.

May we go with the fierce energy of the Spirit in our bodies.

May we go with the God of love streaming through us and out into the world.

Go in peace, and serve the Lord.

Amen.⁷

⁶ Prayers of intercession written by Alison Judd

⁷ Additional prayers by Tim Baker