

This short act of worship has been prepared for you by Revd Dan Haylett to use whilst we are unable to use Methodist Church premises. We invite you to spend a few moments with God, knowing that other people are sharing this act of worship with you.

A Covenant Service

Opening Prayer

God of grace,
through the mediation of your Son, you call us into a new covenant. Help us therefore to draw near with faith and join ourselves in a perpetual covenant with you; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

God, draw near to us in Christ: **Enliven our hope.**

God, let grace take hold of us: **Shaping our lives.**

God, may your Spirit bind us together in service and joy: **May our lives be open to you.**

As we renew this covenant, may our thanks and praise rise to you, our Faithful God. Amen.

Hymn: Faithful One (Singing the Faith 628)

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JqK-UnsRTFI>

Faithful One, so unchanging,
Ageless One, you're my rock of peace.
Lord of all I depend on you,
I call out to you again and again,
I call out to you again and again.
You are my rock in times of trouble.
You lift me up when I fall down.
All through the storm your love is the anchor, my hope is in
you alone.

Brian Doerksen (b. 1965)

Let us pray:

Glory to the Father, the God of love, who created us; who continually preserves and sustains us; who has loved us with an everlasting love, and given us the light of the knowledge of his glory in the face of Jesus Christ.

Blessed be God for ever.

Glory to Jesus Christ our Saviour, who, though he was rich, yet for our sake became poor, and was tested in every way as we are, yet without sin; who proclaimed the good news of the kingdom, and was obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross; who was raised from the dead and is alive for ever, to all who trust in him; who is seated at God's right hand in glory, and will come to be our judge.

Blessed be God for ever.

Glory to the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, by whom we are born into the family of God, and made members of the body of Christ; whose witness confirms us; whose wisdom teaches us; whose power enables us; who will do for us more than we can ask or think.

Blessed be God for ever.

To the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be praise and glory for ever. **Amen.**

Today's Reading from the Law:

Deuteronomy 29:10-15:

You stand assembled today, all of you, before the LORD your God—the leaders of your tribes your elders, and your officials,

all the men of Israel, ¹¹ your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water— ¹² to enter into the covenant of the LORD your God, sworn by an oath, which the LORD your God is making with you today; ¹³ in order that he may establish you today as his people, and that he may be your God, as he promised you and as he swore to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob. ¹⁴ I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the LORD our God, ¹⁵ but also with those who are not here with us today.

Today's reading from the Prophets:

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. ³² 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. 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.

Today’s reading from the Epistles:

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. ² 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.

Today’s Gospel Reading:

John 1:14-18:

⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.’”) ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given

through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.

Reflection:

The prayer at the heart of our Covenant Service seems to take on especial significance for us as we renew our commitment to God in 2021. You can probably take any line of the great covenant prayer and unpack layers of meaning as you reflect on your own experiences – and the experiences of those around you – in 2020.

“Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you”. How those words resonate with those who have lost work, or have found themselves unable to do the things they had expected and planned to do last year!

“Let me be full, let me be empty”. How those words hit home to those who have known and live with real grief and loss; and for those who have felt that the whole fabric of their lives has been ripped apart.

Not only do these words seem to carry extra resonance and carry deeper meaning this year, but also the context of our current lives adds to the sense of poignancy and profound

truth of what we are doing in this act of worship. We cannot gather together, as the community in Deuteronomy were reported to have done as one before God. We are making and renewing our commitment to God from our own homes, separately, yet somehow being held by the prayers of our sisters and brothers in accountability, love and mutual commitment. Just as the people of God in our first reading “stood in” for those not present that day before God; so our unity and corporate belonging is not diminished by the fact that we will make this prayer alone. We stand together in our commitment and discipleship, though we are apart today.

Rather aptly for us, John Wesley in his *Directions for Renewing our Covenant with God* of 1784 suggests that there two aspects of our covenant making: a virtual and a formal aspect. It’s doubtful he anticipated a virtual covenant in the sense of our online worship today, but it’s an intriguing linguistic link to tease out:

Wesley writes of the covenant as:

“VIRTUAL. Which is done by all those who have sincerely made that closure with God in Christ: those that have chosen the Lord, embarked with Christ, resigned up, and given themselves to the Lord, are all engaged persons, and have virtually covenanted with him.”

Our renewed covenant then is a formal endorsement of that which we virtually undertook in baptism and represents our choosing and “resigning up” to what God wants from us and for us to become. We have always been on this journey of faith (elsewhere Wesley writes of this as an “adventure”) and today, virtually, we formalise that commitment again.

Perhaps something of that recommitment is reflected in St. Paul’s words in the opening verses of Romans 12. Paul marks the difference between being transformed continually rather than conforming to the standards and values of those around us. The renewal of our covenant with God, a voluntary binding and casting our lot totally in with God, is about us accepting our need and willingness to be transformed. This is not self-help, nor is it us living “our best life”. This is about us being willing to yield control and our own desire in preference for God’s direction and employment. It is a handing over of the controls, the keys, the wallet, the diary – or whatever other symbols of power you can think of – in order that our hearts might be made new and ready for God.

This might sound like hard work, and it is. It is the work of God within us, the “slow and faithful work of God” as Thomas Merton imagines it. The author of the Fourth Gospel sees it as “grace upon grace” that God works within us, perfecting us.

Hard work it is, but possible for people like us. We meet, as we hear in the covenant service “as generations have met before us”, making the virtual a formal reality in our commitment and love for God. Not just as Methodists of course, or Moravians from whom Mr Wesley possibly borrowed the idea in the first place, but joining in with all of God’s people in cooperation.

In November 2020, the former Chief Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks died. In remembering his life and incredible service to people of all faith and none, Rowan Williams highlighted what he saw was Sacks’ brilliant focus: the idea of the “voluntary covenant as the basis of social life”. Sacks’ message and our covenant making converge: they are about agreeing to remain connected despite the strains and stresses of life. Community, the Church, is built when people like us choose to remain rooted and grounded in Christ, in offering up what we have and allowing God a look in to transform, renew and bring together the fragments of our offering.

This really matters: our voluntary covenant, in partnership with a God who in Christ has already reached out and chosen to work with and through people like us. That is grace upon grace: that “out of the fullness of God” we have received the grace to become empty or laid aside. We make our covenant together, virtually and formally in the knowledge that God’s

grace helps us and leads us and binds us to God and to one another.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

The Covenant:

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 no longer 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.

Let us then seek forgiveness for the sin by which we have denied God’s claim upon us.

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

For the sin that has made us slow to learn from Christ, reluctant to follow him, and afraid to bear the cross:

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

For the sin that has caused the poverty of our worship, the formality and selfishness of our prayers, our neglect of fellowship and the means of grace, and our hesitating witness for Christ:

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

For the sin that has led us to misuse your gifts, evade our responsibilities, and fail to be good stewards of your creation:

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

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:

Lord, have mercy, **Lord, forgive.**

Have mercy on me, O God, in your constant love; in the fullness of your mercy blot out all my offences. Wash away all my guilt, and cleanse me from my sin. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. Give me the joy of your help again and strengthen me with a willing spirit.

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.'

Amen. Thanks be to God.

Beloved in Christ, let us again claim for ourselves this covenant which God has made with his people, and take upon us the yoke of Christ. This means that we are content that he appoint us our place and work, and that he himself be our reward.

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. Lord God, holy Father, since you have called us through Christ to share in this gracious covenant, we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience and, for love of you, engage ourselves to seek and do your perfect will. We are no longer our own but yours.

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.

And now, glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours. So be it. And the covenant now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen.

As we have entered 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 the saints who have entered your eternal glory: **bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.**

We pray for our own needs and for those of others...

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

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your Name;
your kingdom come,
your will be done, on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and for ever. **Amen.**

Hymn: O Thou Who Camest From Above (StF 564)

Sing / read / pray / proclaim the words or listen to it here

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

O thou who camest from above
the pure celestial fire to impart,
kindle a flame of sacred love
on the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
with inextinguishable blaze,
and trembling to its source return,
in humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
to work, and speak, and think for thee;
still let me guard the holy fire,
and still stir up thy gift in me –

Ready for all thy perfect will,
my acts of faith and love repeat,
till death thy endless mercies seal,
and make the sacrifice complete.

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

A prayer of blessing

The blessing of God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you us and remain with us for ever. **Amen.**

(Material taken from The Methodist Worship Book, Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, Peterborough, 1999 and Singing the Faith, Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes, Hymns Ancient & Modern, London, 2011).