

REFLECTION FOR COVENANT SUNDAY 2020

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At the heart of the Covenant Service is a prayer. Perhaps turn to it and have a quick look at it now.

*[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.]*

Every year, at this service I seek to stress that this is a prayer that we say not simply as individuals before God but also together *as a community before God*. I say it each year because I think it's really important.

Despite the fact that the prayer is written in the first person singular and is all 'I, I,' and 'me, me, me', being a follower of Jesus Christ isn't - and never has been - a solo task or quest. Whether we use Paul's parts of the body analogy or Jesus' vine and branches imagery, the message is clear - being a member of the Church binds us not only to Jesus, to God, to God's Spirit, but also to one another.

In saying the words that we do today, in praying this prayer, we're not simply committing (or re-committing) ourselves to God, we're also committing (or re-committing) ourselves to one another. For we're saying implicitly (if not explicitly) that, alongside each other, we'll strive to understand and live this connected life of discipleship thing a little better and, as we do so, we'll seek to support one another in bearing the cost of it. But still, I know that it's difficult. The prayer does say 'I' and 'me', and its language is emotive. It's almost impossible to say these words and not be drawn into believing that this is a very personal experience. It is, of course, and it can be. But it has to be broader than that too.

If ever there was a time to remind ourselves that these are words that bind us, it's surely now - when we have become more accustomed than ever before to joining with others remotely, when we have come to know and rely upon the fact that the words that we utter

into a screen, into our living rooms or from behind a mask in a socially-distanced church environment are added to by others elsewhere. That when we say our prayers we are not doing so alone. We haven't just had to believe that - we've felt it and found it to be true. So, in that sense, we're perhaps all more receptive to understanding the Covenant Prayer to be one that we say alone but together. But even beyond this, our life together in recent months has shown us how bound together we actually are. Just think of the life of the church over the past year in the light of this prayer.

Ranked alongside other social activities by our Government, the Church was, in March, instructed to suspend its worship and close its doors. What it had traditionally understood "**doing**" to mean had to be revised drastically. It wasn't easy. It still isn't easy. The whole experience has induced heartache and pain and a fair amount of soul-searching. Add to all of this the deaths of countless members, and I think it would be fair to say that the Church has indeed experienced its share of **suffering** of late.

The Church has begun to understand what it is to be **employed** in a new way and not least because it was **laid aside**. And, for all that it could be argued that it has been **exalted** in a new way - online attendances rocketing to the point where it was claimed that 1 in 4 people were suddenly attending church - the feeling for many was that it had indeed been **brought low**. Churches are rarely **full** except perhaps over Easter and Christmas - but to be as **empty** as they have been (or still shut) has been the source not just of disappointment and regret but also frustration and anger.

Echoing the sentiment, 'you don't know what you've got til it's gone', the Church never knew that it had **all things** until everything was taken away and it felt at times like suddenly it **had nothing**.

Now I'm not saying that any of this was the will of God, that God was or is in anyway responsible for, or using, the Covid-19 pandemic to test us - let me be absolutely clear, that is not what I'm saying - but then the words of the Covenant Prayer were never intended to ask God to make us suffer, or cite God as being the source of the testing. Rather (and as it says in the introduction to the service in the Methodist Worship Book) the prayer seeks to express 'that we desire, by God's help, actively to do or patiently to accept whatever is God's will for us'. That whatever situation in life that we find ourselves in, we respond as God would have us do.

I will leave it to you to decide how well the Church has done in all of this in recent months. Because, as followers of Jesus Christ, we are bound to one another, bearing a special duty of care to the most vulnerable amongst us, I think we've done OK, that we have responded as God would have us do. We've remained apart in order to keep one another safe but we've also done as much as we can to stay in touch with one another, to care for one another and for others besides.

For all that, I'm not particularly keen on having another year like the last one - I'd much prefer us be doing, employed, exalted and full rather than suffering, laid aside, brought low and empty (as I feel sure we all would) - but though we haven't had all things, we certainly haven't had nothing. We know that God has been with us. We have more than sensed that.

So, whilst it is perhaps with some trepidation that we gather in the way that we have to say these words again today, and pray this prayer, let us remember that we can do so with some confidence - trusting in God's promises, relying on God's grace.