



# The Methodist Church

## Ripon and Lower Dales Methodist Circuit Worship at Home – 15 January 2023

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Wherever you are sharing in this act of worship, you are welcome.

A prayer to prepare ourselves for worship:  
Blessed are you, Sovereign God, creator of all, to you be glory and praise for ever. You founded the earth in the beginning and the heavens are the work of your hands.

In the fullness of time you made us in your image, and in these last days you have spoken to us in your Son Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh.

As we rejoice in the gift of your presence among us  
let the light of your love always shine in our hearts,  
your Spirit ever renew our lives  
and your praises ever be on our lips.  
Blessed be God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.  
Blessed be God for ever.

Hymn: Singing the Faith 51

Great is thy faithfulness, O God my Father,  
there is no shadow of turning with thee.  
Thou changest not, thy compassions, they fail not;  
as thou hast been, thou forever wilt be.

*Refrain:*

Great is thy faithfulness!  
Great is thy faithfulness!  
Morning by morning new mercies I see;  
all I have needed thy hand hath provided.  
Great is thy faithfulness, Lord, unto me!

2 Summer and winter and springtime and harvest,  
sun, moon, and stars in their courses above  
join with all nature in manifold witness  
to thy great faithfulness, mercy, and love.

*[Refrain]*

3 Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth,  
thine own dear presence to cheer and to guide,  
strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow,

blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside!  
 [Refrain]

Prayer:

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.

**Blessèd 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,  
and has opened the kingdom of heaven to all who trust in him;  
who is seated at God's right hand in glory,  
and will come to be our judge.

**Blessèd 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.

**Blessèd be God for ever.**

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

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.**

Reading: 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<sup>[a]</sup> them,<sup>[b]</sup>”  
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.”

Reading: 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.

### Reflection

As is our tradition, early in the New Year we  
meet to renew our covenant with God. This is  
a distinctively Methodist practice which can  
be traced back to the first covenant service  
held by John Wesley in 1755. That first  
service took place in August, but it soon  
became the custom for the covenant renewal  
to take place early in the year, as a day of  
solemn reflection and rededication. That  
these were times of great spiritual blessing is  
evident from Wesley’s descriptions in his  
Journal. For example, on Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> January  
1775 Wesley wrote:

We had a larger congregation at the renewal  
of the Covenant than we have had for many  
years; and I do not know that ever we had a  
greater blessing. Afterwards many desired to  
return thanks, either for a sense of pardon,  
for full salvation, or for a fresh manifestation  
of his grace, healing all their backsliding.

In Wesley’s time the covenant service would  
be preceded by a period of preparation,  
including prayer, fasting and exhortation,  
which helped to underscore the importance of  
what was taking place. These days, coming  
so soon after the excess of Christmas and  
New Year, it is more likely to be preceded by  
feasting rather than fasting and the rigorous  
seriousness of the covenant service  
increasingly feels like a much needed  
spiritual detox. It is unfortunate that the  
covenant service has become detached from  
the prayer and preparation that used to

precede it, for what we do today is no trivial or insignificant matter.

It is, perhaps, stating the obvious that at the heart of the covenant service is the biblical concept of *covenant*. Our scripture readings illustrate different facets of what is a rich and varied theme. But today I want us to particularly focus on the reading from Jeremiah which introduces the idea of a 'new covenant'. Because this passage takes us to the heart of what covenant is about and therefore to the heart of what we are doing as we renew the covenant today.

This is one of those Bible passages that it is often read in isolation, taken out of its original context. If we really want to understand what Jeremiah was talking about, we need to remind ourselves of the background to the reading.

At the very beginning of his ministry God had given Jeremiah a task: "I appoint you over nations and kingdoms to uproot and tear down, to destroy and overthrow, to build and to plant." For some forty years Jeremiah was faithful to his calling, prophesying that unless the people of Judah returned to God, the destruction of their nation was inevitable. And indeed, Jeremiah came to witness the utter defeat and dismantling of the nation at the hands of the Babylonian armies; all that had been prophesied had come to pass. Read the first 29 chapters of Jeremiah and you will find them unrelenting in doom and gloom; but then suddenly and unexpectedly at the beginning of chapter 30 the gloom lifts and there is a new message: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people." After all that uprooting and tearing, destroying and overthrowing, Jeremiah is now to build and plant. This change of tone continues to the end of chapter 33, and this part of Jeremiah is often referred to as the 'Book of Consolation' or the 'Book of Comfort'.

Our reading about the new covenant is therefore part of the Book of Consolation and looks beyond the present desperate plight of the people to the time when God would heal their wounds, bring them back from the land of exile, and restore the land. Even the covenant-relationship between God and his

people would be restored: "At that time... I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they will be my people."

But how could a covenant-relationship so utterly broken be restored? People had failed to live up to the covenant in the past – what guarantee was there that things would be any better in the future?

That brings us to the verses in question. What do we learn about covenant from this text?

Firstly, the covenant is primarily understood as a *relationship*. The words used to describe the nature of this relationship are very interesting: 'I was their husband, says the Lord'. Husband and wife – you don't get a much closer relationship than that. We need to recall that the concept of covenant was not viewed in the Old Testament in legal terms... Covenant was a metaphorical way to describe the relationship between God and the people in terms of mutual interaction. God revealed himself to the people ("I will be your God") and expected the people to respond to that revelation with worship and faithfulness ("you shall be my people"). The breaking of covenant then, was not the violation of a law that required a legal penalty, but the disruption of a relationship that needed healing and restoration.

God may have been husband, but the people have been unfaithful. This unfaithfulness is presented in the most graphic terms in chapter 3, where Israel is likened to an unfaithful wife actively pursuing her many lovers. The relationship between God and his people had been destroyed. The old covenant "could not be resurrected as if nothing had happened, certainly not by the people who had destroyed it." Something new and radical needed to be done if there was to be a new relationship between God and people.

So, the first point is that covenant – and this is as true of the covenant we are making today as covenant in the Bible – is primarily about a relationship; the relationship between God and people. Or as God says through Jeremiah: I will be their God, and they shall be my people. So later when we make the

Covenant Prayer, we will say to God: you are mine, and I am yours. If you don't remember anything else about the sermon today, remember this phrase: I will be your God, and you will be my people. This is the very centre of what covenant is all about.

The second thing we learn about this covenant is that it is written on people's hearts.

"This is the covenant that I will make" says God: "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts."

What the people needed was not a new law or a change of the law but a change of *heart*, so that they might remain faithful to the relationship to which God had called them; and a change of mind, so that they could live in the way God wanted them to live.

This language of the heart is present also in Psalm 51, which is used in the prayers of the liturgy of the Covenant Service:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,  
and renew a right spirit within me.

What does it mean, when God says he will write his law on people's hearts? We're obviously using more metaphorical, symbolic language, for God isn't going to literally carve words on the organ beating away in our chest.

Today we tend to think about the heart as the seat of the emotions, particularly emotions such as compassion and love. The heart symbolises love, particularly romantic love – think of all those Valentine Day cards we'll be sending in a month's time. In contrast with the heart the *head* is the logical, reasoning part of ourselves. In actual fact science tells us our thoughts and feelings all come from the brain – the heart is just a muscular pump – but this is the language of metaphor, of poetry. So we feel with our heart and think with our head.

Now for the ancient Hebrews, the heart wasn't just associated with emotions, but with the rational, decision-making part of us as well. So when Jeremiah speaks of God writing his law on our hearts he doesn't just

mean that we will have a warm and fuzzy emotional feeling toward God; he means that the desire to put God's will and purposes into practice will be absolutely engrained in our deepest being.

The third thing we learn about the covenant – is that the initiative for making this covenant is totally with God. That's true for all the covenants in the Bible – they all begin with God. But there's something special about this new covenant.

Even if God restores the people to the land, enables them to experience prosperity and joy and shows love to them again, that will not be enough. Something must change within the people themselves. Here God promises to heal them from the inside out. God will change not only their outward circumstances, but their very hearts.

Let's hear that again, this time in the first person, so we can hear it applied to us:

Outward change will not be enough. Something must change within ourselves. Here God promises to heal us from the inside out. God will change not only our outward circumstances, but our very hearts.

God takes the initiative, God does all the work. Left to our own devices, our covenant-relationship with God is fragile and easily disrupted, for like ancient Israel we are so readily tempted by the many false gods of our contemporary society and we find it so hard to put God's teaching into practice in our lives. But we are not left to our own devices. God promises to change us; to renew our minds and write his word upon our hearts.

This, my dear friends, is *grace* – God offers us both a covenant-relationship with him and the promise to change our hearts so we can be faithful to that relationship. God even promises to wipe the slate clean. Or to use a more modern analogy, God offers to press the reset button. Many modern electronic gadgets such as phones have a reset button, so that if anything goes badly wrong – or you just want to restore it to the speedy, reliable device that it used to be –

you press reset. And bingo, all the stuff you downloaded, the pointless apps, the viruses and other rubbish you accumulated, disappear and the phone is back to its factory condition, just as the maker intended. In v.34 of Jeremiah here is God pressing reset: "I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more."

A new relationship – written on people's hearts – initiated by God; in fact, a *gift* of God. This is the covenant which we are renewing today. We thank God that he not only offers this covenant-relationship with him, but gives us the ability to keep it! If it were not so, the commitment we make today in the words of the covenant prayer would be quite foolish and would last as long as many of the resolutions made with the New Year and already broken. But there is grace here, and the power of God to change us, and it is this that makes us bold to renew the covenant today. May God bless us and keep us in all we do today and in this coming year. Amen.

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.

### Hymn – Singing the Faith 549

Come, let us use the grace divine,  
And all, with one accord,  
In a perpetual cov'nant join  
Ourselves to Christ the Lord:

Give up ourselves, through Jesu's  
power,  
His name to glorify;  
And promise, in this sacred hour,  
For God to live and die.

The cov'nant we this moment make  
Be ever kept in mind:  
We will no more our God forsake,  
Or cast his words behind.

We never will throw off his fear  
Who hears our solemn vow;  
And if thou art well pleased to hear,  
Come down, and meet us now.

To each the cov'nant blood apply,  
Which takes our sins away;  
And register our names on high, and  
keep us to that day.

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.**

Holy God, we praise you for all that you are.

We thank you for the love we witness through the ebb and flow of cosmic rhythms.

We thank you for the grace that you show to us as individuals.

Give to us courage to enact a way of life to which you have called us.

Give us boldness to be holy people, called to serve the world.

May we be kingdom people who always dare to live and speak out, motivated by our faith in God. Amen.

Hymn: Behold the servant of the Lord –  
Singing the Faith 546

Behold the servant of the Lord!  
I wait Thy guiding eye to feel,  
To hear and keep Thy every word,  
To prove and do Thy perfect will,  
Joyful from my own works to cease,  
Glad to fulfil all righteousness.

Me if Thy grace vouchsafe to use,  
Meanest of all Thy creatures, me,  
The deed, the time, the manner choose,  
Let all my fruit be found of Thee;  
Let all my works in Thee be wrought,  
By Thee to full perfection brought.

My every weak, though good design,  
O'er rule, or change, as seems Thee meet;  
Jesus, let all my work be Thine!  
Thy work, O Lord, is all complete,  
And pleasing in Thy Father's sight;  
Thou only hast done all things right.

Here then to Thee Thy own I leave;  
Mould as Thou wilt Thy passive clay;  
But let me all Thy stamp receive,  
But let me all Thy words obey,  
Serve with a single heart and eye,  
And to Thy glory live and die.

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

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

**In the name of Christ. Amen.**