

Pewsey Methodist Church
Covenant Service – 10th January 2021 - at 10.30am

Welcome to today's act of worship which is our Covenant Sunday. In the Methodist Church the Covenant Service is traditionally held on the first Sunday of the new year or as close as we can to it. So, today we renew our Covenant with God.

The first Covenant Service took place in 1755, when John Wesley created a form of service adapted from the works of Joseph and Richard Alleine, who came from the Puritan tradition of worship which contained pastoral and spiritual guidance. Wesley therefore insisted that the Covenant Service should be located in a framework of pastoral care, preaching and guidance.



This idea of Covenant was basic to John Wesley's understanding of Christian discipleship and this service was developed over a number of years. At first, he saw the relationship with God in Covenant as being like a marriage between human beings (both as a community and as individuals) on the one side and God in Christ on the other (cf. Ephesians 5.21-33).

John Wesley also recognised that people needed not just to accept and believe in God, but also to grow in relationship with Him. He therefore emphasised that God's grace and love constantly prompts and seeks to transform us, and so we should continually seek and pray to grow in holiness and love. Wesley gradually saw the need for some regular ceremony which would enable people to open themselves to God more fully. He looked for some means of helping them to hear God's offer and challenge ever more deeply, and to allow God to prompt and enable them to respond. So, in 1755 the new Covenant Service took place and the people of God, known as Methodists have been using it annually ever since to deepen our faith, commitment and walk with God.

After living through such a difficult year, the Covenant Service gives us an opportunity to reflect on the past year and seek how God wants us to respond to all that has happened since we last renewed our Covenant with Him. We all have our stories to tell about 2020 and our Covid-19 experiences and it is important that we recognise them. So, as we go through last year, remembering its different events, I invite you to rejoice and thank God for the good things which happened; lament over the bad, difficult things and ask for God's peace; and as we recall our mistakes, repent and ask for God's forgiveness. Although we find ourselves in another national lockdown, we begin 2021 in hope, knowing that God, who is with us, has brought us through 2020, and we can trust him for all that is to come in this new year. As we share in this Covenant Service, let us open ourselves fully to God, listen to his prompting and be guided by the Holy Spirit.

As we join in worship now, if any word, phrase or sentence from a hymn, the Bible, a prayer, the reflection or the covenant itself, leaps off the page at us, or sticks in our mind, ask what is God saying to you through it? Before we begin, I invite you to be quiet for a few moments and then ask, "Lord, what are You asking of me this year? How do You want me to be different? Is there some new spiritual discipline that You're inviting me to develop? (Pause and pray). Lord, I ask You to give me a verse from the Bible or a word or a story for 2021. 'Speak Lord, Your servant is listening.'" (1 Samuel 3:10) from "Lectio 365".

You may like to light a candle as you come to worship now.

Jane and Hannah join me in wishing you a very Happy New Year. May God bless you richly in 2021.

Stephen

WELCOME & CALL TO WORSHIP

Your unfailing love, O Lord, is as vast as the heavens;
your faithfulness reaches beyond the clouds.

⁶Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your justice like the ocean depths.

You care for people and animals alike, O Lord.

⁷How precious is your unfailing love, O God!

All humanity finds shelter
in the shadow of your wings.

⁸You feed them from the abundance of your own
house,

letting them drink from your river of delights.

⁹For you are the fountain of life,

the light by which we see. *Psalm 36:5-9*



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Hymn: StF 470 Lord, For the Years Your Love has Kept and Guided

Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words

Timothy Dudley-Smith (b.1926)

PRAYERS:

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.

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.**

Silence

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.**



THE MINISTRY OF THE WORD

A 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.

For the wisdom that guides us
we praise you, O God.

A 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.

For the word that inspires us
we praise you, O God.

A 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.

For the truth that enlightens us
we praise you, O God.

Hymn: StF 547 Beyond these walls of worship *Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words*

Words and music: Ian Worsfold (b.1974) and Paul Wood (b.1967)

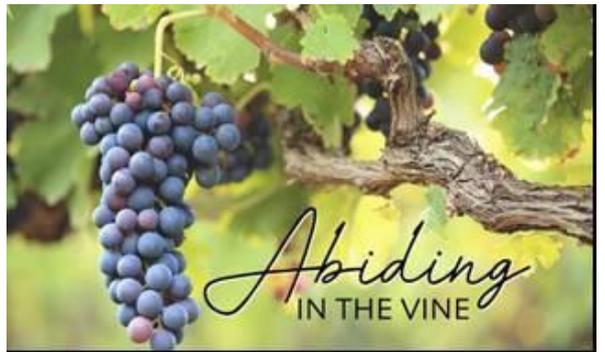
GOSPEL READING

A reading from the Gospel - John 15.1-10

Hear the Gospel of Christ.

Glory to Christ our Saviour.

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.



Footnotes

- John 15:2 The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing
- John 15:3 The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing
- John 15:8 Or *be*

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This is the Gospel of Christ.

Praise to Christ our Lord.

REFLECTION

View on YouTube

One of my Christmas gifts was Barak Obama's "A Promised Land", which I am thoroughly enjoying. Early in the book, he describes how as a Democrat in the Illinois state senate, he would visit colleagues in their home districts across the state. He usually went with his chief senate aide, Dan Shomon, who at first was worried about how a Black lawyer from Chicago with an Arab sounding name would be received in downstate Illinois. Although Dan was apprehensive that Barak would feel out of place. Barak actually felt that everything was very familiar, whether they were at a county fair or a union hall or on the porch on someone's farm. He writes that everything was familiar "*In the way people described their families or their jobs. In their modesty and their hospitality. In their enthusiasm for high school basketball. In the food*



they served, the fried chicken and baked beans and Jell-O molds. In them I heard echoes of my grandparents, my mother, Mitchell's mom and dad. Same values. Same hopes and dreams." (Barak's spelling – not mine!).

Barak Obama realized that as long as those who lived in his Chicago district were strangers to those who lived downstate, politics would never really change. It was too easy for politicians to treat people as stereo-types and pit different groups against each other, such as Black against white, immigrant against native-born and rural interests against those of cities. However, he continues, *"If, on the other hand, a campaign could somehow challenge America's reigning political assumptions about how divided we were, well then just maybe it would be possible to build a new covenant, (my underlining), between its citizens"*.

The word "covenant" leapt off the page at me. He then continues to say that no insiders would then be able to play one group off against another. What he wanted was a politics that *"bridged America's racial, ethnic, and religious divides, as well as many strands of (his) own life"*.

God's covenant was originally with Israel and built a bridge between God and his people. The new covenant now builds a bridge between God and all people. The covenant is a sign of God's unfailing love for us and now is not only seen through the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, but through Jesus. Jesus has built the bridge between us and God, not through the keeping of the Law of the old covenant, but through belief in him. Jesus' love breaks through all barriers of race, status, wealth, nationalism, gender, age and of any other "ism" we can think.



The new covenant of which Jeremiah speaks, is the new covenant which Jesus makes with us at the Last Supper when he takes the cup of wine and says, *"This is my blood of the new covenant which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins"*, (Matthew 26:28). Jesus' death on the cross and the shedding of his blood, brings us forgiveness and new life in him. Our following Jesus, our living with him, our relationship with him is our way of living the new covenant and our sharing of the bread and wine is a reminder that we enjoy a new covenant with God. This covenant is not written on stone, but in our hearts, as we enter it willingly out of love for God.

In a few moments, we will renew our covenant with God, just as John Wesley instigated all those years ago. As we come to repeat the words confirming our love of God and binding ourselves again to him in love, it gives us an opportunity to reflect over the past year. Various phrases recall events of past years when one sentence has meant more than others. Perhaps we have been ill and unable to work for God as we had hoped, or we may have changed jobs or where we live, so that we were placed with new people. Last year when we said, *"Your will, not mine, be done in all things, wherever you may place me, in all that I do and in all that I endure..."* I never dreamt that our church building would close for worship and that I'd be placed at the end of a telephone to be with people and a camera to video and live-stream worship! We didn't expect we'd be enduring a pandemic, isolating, shielding and staying safe and all that has involved, or being key workers or putting ourselves in danger by doing our work caring for others.

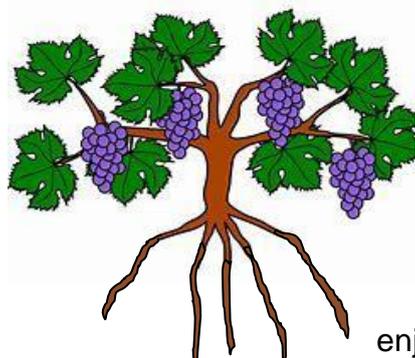
It is worth taking some time at the beginning of this wonderful new year, reflecting on 2020 in the presence of God in prayer. As we remember the events of the last twelve months, think of the good things and rejoice, thanking God for his unfailing love and constant presence with us. When the bad and difficult things come to mind, lament, remember that God is with us and pray that God would replace our sadness with joy. As we recall our mistakes, let us repent and pray for forgiveness.

As we pause and think about each event of the past year, whether it is something personal, concerning our church community, our nation or the world, let us be aware of how they make us feel. Give those feelings to God and either rejoice, lament or repent.

Having reflected on 2020, let us think about 2021 and give thanks for this wonderful new year, bringing a new start and new hope. We pray to God for all the things we hope it will bring to us

personally, as a church, a nation and for the whole world. We rejoice in the vaccine and the hope that it brings. We pray for its distribution. As we renew our covenant, we again place our hope and trust in God, knowing that he will be with us through the Holy Spirit, guiding and empowering us.

We do this by “abiding” in Jesus, just as he instructed the first disciples. In the last of the “I am” sayings, Jesus declares that he is the true vine. Israel has been described as the vine, but it has usually been a poor one and not produced much fruit, (e.g. *Isaiah 5:1-4, Jeremiah 2:21; Psalm 80:8*).



Jesus is the true vine who bears fruit. God, the Father, is the gardener who planted the vine and prunes and cleanses the small shoots and branches which don't produce any fruit. By doing what the Father wants, Jesus bears much fruit. A vine owner and grower once told Jane and me that the best fruit is produced by the vine which really has to struggle to reach the nutrients it needs by sending its roots deep into the ground, suffering hard winters and stony ground. Jesus suffers and produces the best fruit of forgiveness, life in all its fulness and eternal life. The fruit which we enjoy comes at great cost to Jesus.

We too bear fruit when we abide in Jesus. We do this by spending time in prayer. Perhaps this year, God is leading us into new ways of praying or exploring his Word in the Bible. We abide in Jesus through loving him and each other, as the church is a community of love. We bear fruit by sharing God's love, not just within the church family, but in the local community as we faithfully try to help people and improve their lives, and in the wider world. When we renew our covenant, we know that we can only keep our promises by abiding in Jesus. It is impossible to do things on our own strength. We rely totally on God and the Holy Spirit working within us.

We are also helped to abide in Jesus by following “A Methodist Way of Life”. It reminds us that “The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission”. A Methodist Way of Life, with God's help, involves a life of worship, learning and caring, service, and evangelism, so that we may “*be a blessing within and beyond God's Church, for the transformation of the world*”. (*“A Methodist Way of Life” is printed at the end of the worship sheet*).

When Barak Obama thought about the covenant which was needed to change American politics, he realised that he would need to do it on a national stage, rather than a state one. So, it would lead him into standing for Congress. He also knew that he could only do it with the support of Michelle. When we renew our covenant we know that we cannot do it alone. We can only fulfil our commitment within the community of the Church and with the Holy Spirit dwelling within us as we abide in Jesus, faithfully following him day by day. Amen.

Hymn: StF 555 Jesus, all for Jesus *Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words*

Jennifer Atkinson and Robin Mark

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.

View on 



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.

Let us pray.



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.

Silence

**Have mercy on me, O God,
in your constant love;
in the fullness of your mercy
blot out 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.

Sisters and brothers in Christ,
let us again accept our place within this
covenant which God has made with us and with all who are called to be Christ's disciples.

This means that, by the help of the Holy
Spirit, we accept God's purpose for us,
and the call to love and serve God
in all our life and work.

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.

Eternal God,
in your faithful and enduring love
you call us to share in your gracious
covenant in Jesus Christ.
In obedience we hear and accept your commands;
in love we seek to do your perfect will;
with joy we offer ourselves anew to you.
We are no longer our own but yours.

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.**

Silence

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 your saints who have entered your eternal glory:

bring us all to share in your heavenly kingdom.

Let us pray in silence for our own needs and for those of others . . .

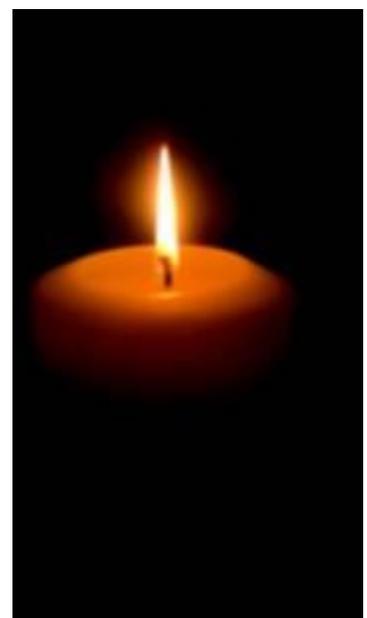
Silence

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 servants' 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

We say together the prayer that Jesus gave us:



**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.
Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For the kingdom, the power and the glory are Yours,
now and for ever. Amen**

Hymn: StF 564 O Thou who Camest from Above *Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words*

Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

THE BLESSING

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

Hymn: StF 545 Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my Heart *Sing/read/pray/proclaim the words*

Irish 8th century

An Irish Blessing

Christ be with me, Christ within me,
Christ behind me, Christ before me,
Christ beside me, Christ to win me,
Christ to comfort and restore me,
Christ beneath me, Christ above me,
Christ in quiet, Christ in danger,
Christ in hearts of all that love me,
Christ in mouth of friend and stranger.

St. Patrick

Go in peace to love and serve the Lord.
In the name of Christ. Amen.



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A Methodist Way of Life

The calling of the Methodist Church is to respond to the gospel of God's love in Christ and to live out its discipleship in worship and mission.

As far as we are able, with God's help:

Worship

- We will **pray** daily.
- We will **worship** with others regularly.
- We will **look and listen for God** in Scripture, and the world.

Learning and Caring

- We will **care for ourselves** and **those around us**.
- We will **learn more** about our faith.
- We will **practise** hospitality and generosity.

Service

- We will **help people** in our communities and beyond.
- We will **care for creation** and all God's gifts.
- We will **challenge** injustice.

Evangelism

- We will **speak** of the **love of God**.
- We will **live** in a way that **draws others to Jesus**.
- We will **share** our **faith** with others.

May we be a blessing within and beyond God's Church, for the transformation of the world.