

Worship @ Home

Sunday 10th January 2021

A covenant service and love feast



Worship Leader: Revd Val Reid

Reader: Cath Edmonds

Music: Tom Nicholls and Emma Lewis

Technician: Tony Edmonds

Call to worship

God's grace and peace are with us.

Let our hearts be filled with joy.

Welcome

A warm welcome to all of you who are joining us for worship this morning.

This is our Covenant Sunday!

John Wesley began the Covenant tradition, borrowing this service from the Moravians.

He saw it as a challenge to keep on keeping on in our journey with God.

Each year we remind ourselves what it means to be committed to this life of faith, and to be walking this journey with God.

It's not easy!

And especially it's not easy at the start of 2021, as we move back into a national lockdown.

Although we could meet face-to-face to worship, we have decided not to, in order to support and protect each other.

This means a considerable sacrifice for those of us who really miss on-premises opportunities to see each other's faces, and worship God in real space as well as real time. But today's reading reminds us that as the Christchurch community we are linked together like a living, growing vine – linked with each other through Christ.

We'll be thinking later in the service about what this means for living in lockdown yet again.

We will also say the traditional covenant prayer together.

I've chosen this year to use the original words, rather than the updated version.

One of the changes the writers of the Methodist Worship Book made was to change the word 'suffering'.

The traditional Covenant prayer invites us to say:

'Put me to doing, put me to suffering'.

The original meaning of 'suffering' was not to suffer as we understand it, but to endure, to wait, to accept things that we hadn't ourselves chosen.

The opposite of doing – where we have choice and agency in our lives.

This year we have been suffering in both old and new senses.

We have had to learn to accept things we would not have chosen.

And we have all suffered from a whole range of things which COVID has brought into our lives – loneliness, illness, death itself.

So I think that at the start of 2021, *suffering* is a powerful and resonant word to use.

The Covenant Service is always part of a communion service.

Of course we can't share communion online, but we can share a love feast.

So I invite you to have something to eat and drink to hand.

Later in the service we will eat and drink together, though we are apart, as a symbol of our interconnectedness.

My name is Val, and I'm the minister at Christchurch Hitchin and at Pirton.

In order to reduce the risk of COVID transmission, we are broadcasting this service not from the church, but from our homes.

But though we are geographically apart, we are together in this moment in time.

Wherever you are, you are all welcome.

Our reader this morning is Cath Edmonds.

Tom Nicholls and Emma Lewis are providing the music.

And Tony Edmonds is the technician who makes everything possible.

Music – StF 544

As the deer pants for the water
So my soul longs after you.
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you.

*You alone are my strength my shield,
To you alone may my spirit yield;
You alone are my heart's desire
And I long to worship you.*

I want you more than gold or silver,
Only you can satisfy;
You alone are the real joy-giver
And the apple of my eye.

You alone are my strength my shield...

You're my friend and you are my brother
Even though you are a king.
I love you more than any other,
So much more than anything.

You alone are my strength my shield...

Martin J Nystrom

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.

Cath will now share one of the traditional Covenant readings, from John's gospel:

John 15: 1-11

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

Reflection

Almost exactly a year ago, on January 5th 2020, Professor Zhang Yongzhen completed the task he had set himself.

Professor Zhang worked at the Shanghai Public Health Centre.

And the task was to map the whole genome sequence of a new coronavirus.

All 28,000 letters of it.

For generations, scientists have got their funding because they are the first to discover something.

Nobel prizes and global recognition are predicated on originality.

Exclusivity.

And there have been some shameful arguments over the years over who first 'discovered' evolution or penicillin.

Science labs have got funding because they are the first.

The only.

Formulae are kept secret, otherwise how would they make a profit from it?

And Professor Zhang worked in authoritarian regime.

China is very protective of its scientists, and of its global reputation.

Professor Zhang knew what the consequences might be if he went public with his information.

But he also knew that the only way this virus would be defeated would be if the global scientific community were able to co-operate.

On January 11th, he passed the genome sequence to a colleague in Australia, who posted it on an open access site.

Within days, Oxford University's Jenner institute, Moderna, and BioNTech had designed their vaccines.

It took a year to test them.

Professor Zhang's lab was closed down by the authorities.

And then re-opened, as they eventually recognised the value of what he had done.

We might think that the moral of this little story is simple.

Co-operation, not competition, is the way forward.

And yes, of course it is.

But this week we have seen that co-operation is not always a force for good.

Just think about the way social media links were used to motivate and organise the protesters who stormed the Capitol.

Online communities such as Q-Anon and the Proud Boys have reinforced each other's insecurities and fears and anger for years.

Till it erupted in violence.

Till it attempted to overturn democracy itself.

In the last month of 2020, Pope Francis published 'Let us Dream'.

It's a short book of reflections which come out of the global COVID pandemic.

'No-one is saved alone', he wrote.

The Pope suggests that the pandemic has underlined our shared vulnerability, and our mutual dependency.

Without the 'we' of a people, of a family, of institutions, of a society that transcends the 'I' of individual interests, life...becomes a battle for supremacy between factions and interests.

The spread of COVID across the world has shocked us out of our selfishness and our egotism, he says.

It has opened up a new space for a more generous and caring post-pandemic politics.

Well.

Yes.

Let's hope so.

But so far signs of generosity and caring have been a tad ambiguous.

Rich countries are stockpiling the vaccine for their own citizens, and poor countries are struggling to catch up.

There are some unholy alliances between the church and the far right in countries like Poland, where access to abortion and LGBTQI rights have been effectively banned.

And there's an increasing gap in our own country between those who have made a profit out of COVID, and those who are going under.

So when Jesus offers the symbol of a vine to his disciples, I think we need to reflect on a whole range of things which are associated with this image.

Yes, it's about mutuality, about interconnectedness, about belonging together.

But it's not just a feel-good picture.

It's also about pruning.

And about fruit.

When I first visited a vineyard in France, I was shocked.

I'd imagined luxurious growth, tendrils of vine, sunshine and delicious green shade.

Instead the vines were fiercely cut back, almost to bare branches.

Because this is the way you get a good crop.

The Greek word in this passage translated as 'prune' means to cut clean.

There are plenty of images in the gospels about cleaning.

On the night before he died, Jesus got down on his knees to wash his disciples' feet.

When Peter got all squeamish about it, Jesus said he could have no share with him unless he allowed him to do it.

Everything, Lord, said Peter.

Not just my feet but my hands and my head.

We need to accept a sometimes uncomfortable cleaning.

We have to be willing to let God have a go with her pruning shears in our lives.

And in the life of the church.

You may have read in Weekly this week a prophecy which Alison Bryan shared with me at the end of 2020.

...this has been a time of paring back, of taking the ministries and the things I have given you to do, taking them back to their bare essentials, their bare roots.

Paring back to the source of growth, the source of life, the source of direction, wisdom, guidance and hope...

Being pruned, being pared back, being cut clean is not comfortable.

But if we are part of the vine which is the body of Christ, we have to accept that this is essential.

Unchecked growth is not necessarily a good thing.

As all of us who are gardeners know all too well.

And the image of the vine is also about fruit.

It's about what the vine produces.

Community, mutuality in and of itself, can be directed to vicious ends, as we have seen this week.

Jesus is reminding his disciples that he has chosen them to be a community of love.

A community where all are welcome to be grafted in to the body of Christ.

If we are not creating a community where all are welcome and all are loved, then what is our community worth?

Which brings us, perhaps, to the difficult question.

How?

How do we maintain community when we can't even meet together?

How do we overcome our natural reluctance to be pruned, even if it's for our own good?

What kind of fruit are we producing in lockdown, when we are struggling with isolation or overload, with our own anxieties and our own depression?

The Covenant Service reminds us that it's not all down to us.

We don't somehow have to lift ourselves up by our own bootlaces.

We don't have to do what my mother always told me to do, when I least wanted to hear it - *pull your socks up Valerie.*

We just have to want to be part of the vine.

We just have to be willing to let God do God's stuff in our lives.

We just have to say yes.

As the words of the Covenant service remind us:

...the power to do all these things is given us in Christ, who strengthens us.

The task of discerning what to do and what to lay aside, lies with us, of course.

And we need to reflect on how we live with suffering – both the passive sort and the horribly painful active sort.

As a church, we need to keep thinking and praying about what we are learning, as collectively we have been cut clean.

What does it mean to be Christchurch if we can't do all the things we used to do?

But we are doing it!

We really are.

I am hugely inspired when someone phones me to say that the needs of those who are isolating and can't go shopping are really on their heart and mind.

How can we help?

You'll see Christine's notice about this in Weekly.

I'm hugely inspired when our trustees meet together on zoom to make a difficult decision about face-to-face worship, and do it thoughtfully and prayerfully and with utter respect for each other's views, different as they are.

I'm hugely inspired when zoom family church put on their covenant backpacks and set off on the journey of faith that starts in January 2021, backpacks full of creativity and fun and the word of God.

All this in the last few days!

So later in this service, as we say the words of the Covenant prayer together, words that have been spoken at the start of a new year for over 250 years, let's do it as a community of Christ.

Rooted and grounded in him.

Holding hands with each other across our broadband connections, dodgy as they sometimes are.

Knowing that it is only with each other, in Christ, that we can face this year.

Amen.

Music [tune StF 186 'tell out my soul']

This hymn was written in 2014 by Rosemary Wakelin, a Methodist minister who – facing retirement – took up a new job as chaplain at a prison for sex offenders in Norwich. It was written for a new direction in her life six years ago. In January 2021 it takes on new meanings for us all. The words are new, but the tune will be familiar!

The world we thought we knew is changing fast,
and longingly we cling to what is past –
that settled life which made no great demand
Our foretaste of the hoped for promised land.

But as for you, dynamic, Pilgrim God,
you do not linger on the path well trod,
but ever lead your pilgrim people on
to risk an unknown future with your Son.

The challenge of diversity and change
will take us well beyond our former range.
Exposing us to things we do not know,
demanding all the love that we can show.

You take the stuff of chaos, fear and dread,
and make a path where we can safely tread;
and if we fear the wildness of the wave,
we know your outstretched hand is there to save.

Words © Rosemary Wakelin

THE COVENANT

Introduction and explanation

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.

And so we commit ourselves, as generations have committed themselves 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.

When I say 'Lord have mercy', please repeat 'Lord have mercy'.

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, have mercy.

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, have mercy.

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, have mercy.

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, have mercy.

Silence

We say together:

**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.**

The presiding minister says:

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.

The promise

We say together:

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.

We listen to some reflective music as we think about the covenant we have just made.

Love Feast

If we were together in church, this is the moment at which we would share communion.
Today we are together yet apart.
Each in our own homes.
Yet bound together as the body of Christ.
And bound together in Christ by the Covenant we have just made.

So now is the moment to share our love feast.
You are invited to eat and drink something.
It doesn't matter what it is.
It might be something you have made.
Or something you have taken out of a packet.
It might be grape juice.
Or a cup of tea.
Or water from the tap.

But as we eat and drink, we know we are part of one body.
One community in Christ.

We listen to some reflective music as we share our love feast.

Prayers for ourselves and others

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.**

Lord's prayer

I invite you now to say the Lord's prayer out loud.

Use whichever version you are familiar with.

Use whichever language feels like your mother tongue.

Although we are apart, we join together in praying 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.

Blessing

Faithful God,
with these holy gifts
you have fed and strengthened us
in Jesus Christ your Son.
Guide us on our way,
that with all your faithful people
we may come to share the feast
of your eternal kingdom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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

Music – StF 545

Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart;
Be all else but naught to me, save that thou art -
Be Thou my best thought, in the day and the night;
Both waking and sleeping, thy presence my light.

Be thou my wisdom, be thou my true word;
Be thou ever with me, and I with thee, Lord.
Be thou my great Father; thy child may I be,
Be thou in me dwelling and I one with thee.

Riches I heed not, nor earth's empty praise;
Be thou mine inheritance, now and always;
Be thou and thou only the first in my heart,
O sovereign of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of heaven, thou Heaven's bright sun,
O grant me its joys after victory is won;
Great heart of my own heart, whatever befall,
Still be thou my vision, O Ruler of all.

*Irish, 8th century,
translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne
versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull*

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