

Worship for Covenant Sunday (complete text. A video version is also online)

Keep safe. Keep caring. Keep praying.

Hello and welcome to our Circuit Covenant service. A welcome if you're joining us on the first Sunday in January when many of our churches will be Covenanting; a welcome if you're joining us at another time. We hope that this service enriches your spiritual journey, encourages you on in your relationship with God, and gives you a way of worshiping Christ this day.

Before we begin my thanks to Lisa and to James who've read our readings for us; to Richard Wilde who has written the pastoral letter that accompanies the written part of this service; and to those who have participated behind the scenes – to Kate for organizing us and to those who've put the videos together so that they form worship.

THE GATHERING OF THE PEOPLE OF GOD

MWB p 282

We take a moment of quiet to prepare ourselves as we come before God.

Silence

Our opening hymn: Praise is rising, hope is stirring, eyes are turning to you

Hymn: StF 64 – Praise is rising, eyes are turning to you

**Praise is rising, eyes are turning to you;
we turn to you.
Hope is stirring, hearts are yearning for you;
we long for you.**

**'Cause when we see you we find
strength to face the day.
In your presence all our fears are**

**washed away,
washed away.**

***Hosanna, hosanna,
you are the God who saves us;
worthy of all our praises.
Hosanna, hosanna,
come have your way among us;
we welcome you here Lord Jesus.***

**Hear the sound of hearts returning to you;
we turn to you.
In your kingdom broken lives are made new;
you make all things new.**

**'Cause when we see you we find
strength to face the day.
In your presence all our fears are
washed away,
washed away.**

***Hosanna, hosanna,
you are the God who saves us;
worthy of all our praises.
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come have your way among us;
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you are the God who saves us;
worthy of all our praises.
Hosanna, hosanna,
come have your way among us;
we welcome you here Lord Jesus.***

Hosanna, hosanna, hosanna, hosanna,

Brenton Brown and Paul Baloche

Our prayers are from the Covenant Service liturgy and they will appear on your screens and you're invited to join in those parts in bold.

Prayer

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
Christ,
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

Collect

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 (NRSVA)

¹⁰You 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, ¹¹your 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; ¹³in 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. ¹⁴I am making this covenant, sworn
by an oath, not only with you who stand here
with us today before the Lord our God, ¹⁵but
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 (NRSVA)

A New Covenant

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It 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. ³³But 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. ³⁴No 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 (NRSVA)

The New Life in Christ

¹ 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 636 – O love that wilt not let me go

**1. O love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee:**

**I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.**

**2. O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
my heart restores its borrowed ray,
that in thy sunshine's blaze its day
may brighter, fairer be.**

**3. O joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee:
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
and feel the promise is not vain,
that morn shall tearless be.**

**4. O cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee:
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
and from the ground there blossoms red
life that shall endless be.**

George Matheson (1842–1906)

A reading from the Gospel according to Mark

Hear the Gospel of Christ.

Glory to Christ our Saviour.

Mark 14:22-25 (NRSVA)

The Institution of the Lord's Supper

²² While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread, and after blessing it he broke it, gave it to them, and said, 'Take; this is my body.' ²³ Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. ²⁴ He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. ²⁵ Truly I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new in the kingdom of God.'

This is the Gospel of Christ.

Praise to Christ our Lord.

Sermon

I wonder what do you think when you hear that next week is Covenant service or next Sunday is Covenant. What did you think when you saw the introduction to today's service and learned that it was our annual Covenant service?

Were you somebody who thought, "Not really, don't really want to go through that"? Were you somebody who thought, "Yes! This is a service I look forward to, and I want to participate in"? Or perhaps you kept on watching because you thought, "I don't know what the Covenant is", and were intrigued to find out what this service is all about.

The Covenant has been part of Methodist worship since the time of John Wesley and like all of his good ideas it came from elsewhere – he borrowed it. And we continue it, although historically it's been distinctly Wesleyan in its style, many churches, denominations now undertake an annual covenant – a renewing of their promises to God; and we meet to do the same as generations before us – as generations before Christ's incarnation – have met to worship God, and to give themselves afresh to God. And so we meet to Covenant.

in this service, in the promises we will make, we give power to God. That might seem like a strange or ridiculous thing to go and do. God is already all-powerful. God's ability to do things, to create things, to build and make things, to alter the universe that is already known. God made everything that exists. Why does God need power from us? What possible reason could God want with us making these promises?

Since the very beginning of humanity, God has chosen to give us the ability to make our own decisions. God has given us free will to decide for ourselves. And historically some have chosen to follow God and some have chosen not to.

Some have determined that the best thing for their lives is to hear God, to study scripture, to look for God in the world around and in each other; and to seek to journey to be the best people that they can be.

Others have chosen a different path – to go their own way, to try and make their own rules and look for their own future.

God does not determine for us, whether we make these promises or not. God, through God's own power, has given each and every one of us free will. To determine for ourselves whether we will acknowledge that we are loved; whether we will respond to that love and continue to respond; or whether we will just say, "Well thank you very much" and be on our own way.

Covenanting is us using our own free will to give back to God that which God gave to us.

Often in society we think of the powerless as people who are unfortunate, who've had power taken away. Yet here we are offering to give to God any power that we have over who we are, how we live, what we will do.

We bear this idea that to be powerless is to open ourselves up to abuse, to being harmed. Perhaps even being childish – if I give power to somebody else then I can't be held responsible for whether anything goes wrong.

In this service we choose to give power to God. We choose to give our very beings to God, not because we wish to be innocent, but because we aren't innocent. We know that we will get things wrong. We will choose to do the wrong thing, sometimes out of sheer selfishness; sometimes because we find ourselves in a difficult situation and don't see any other way out; sometimes because we think we know what's best for us.

We live in a society where we are given rights and freedoms and we can choose to use them or

not. But often if somebody tries to take them, away we can be quite quickly riled into stating the obvious – that's not allowed, that's abusing us, that's offending us, that is taking away our rights – and yet here we are, giving the rights that we do have back to God. And we can do that because we know that God loves us.

Wherever we look in scripture, in the world around us, in the people we know and meet, in our experiences of the Holy Spirit, in the stories about Jesus, we hear again and again and again of a God who loves us. Who loves us so much that he became flesh, lived amongst us, lived our lives, journeyed this mortal life with us. We know that God loves us because Jesus died on the cross for us. God could have chosen to leave us in the mud and the mire, in the difficulties and distress, in the pain, in the dirt – and yet God chooses not to. God chooses to give of God's very self. To live amongst us, to teach us what it is to be children of God and part of the kingdom of God a kingdom that is just to all; where those who abuse power have it taken away and become powerless; and where the powerless are given power because they can be trusted with it. Where those who have not are given from those who have. We might describe that as a Utopia – I would use the word Heaven.

And so we know; so our experiences with God as individuals, as a church, as a whole community, that God seeks only the very best for us. Jesus puts it 'I come that they may have life and have it to the full'. And as part of having life to the full we are called to give back to God that which God already owns – our very lives, our very selves, our very beings; our present and our futures.

Often we think of giving up power as allowing somebody else to do to us. And it's easy in the covenant prayer, and given the last year that we've had with covid and our experiences in life, it's easy to see the negatives of that. The prayer

uses that phrase 'Put me to suffering', but many other phrases within it – 'Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you'. It's easy for us to focus on the negatives of giving up power; to believe that God wants us to suffer – which that line doesn't mean, it acknowledges that sometimes we do suffer for our faith; that sometimes following Christ is not the easy option. And we accept it's not the easy option because in reality it is the only option; the only option to life in all its fullness, to life in eternity, to life in relationship with God.

And so rather than focusing on the negatives of the Covenant – of giving up and making a promise that is going to be difficult to keep, perhaps we focus on the positives: Christ came that we might have life and have it to the full. God doesn't seek to harm us but to build us up. God doesn't seek difficult things for us but wants us to know God's love. That doesn't mean that life can't be difficult, that doesn't mean that it will be a bed of roses and all will be wonderful and great for the year to come. The covenant is about us saying to God, "You direct us. You have control over what we do, where we are, what will happen to us. You have control because we trust you. We trust you to make those decisions. We trust you because we know you love us. We trust you because generations before have trusted you and look where that led – the gift of your Son; life beyond life, life beyond time itself. Life in the presence of God joining, with that heavenly choir of angels and archangels and all who've gone before. We will trust you God. We'll give to you that which you have given to us. We will give it to you, not because you demand it, but because you ask and that it is our free will offering. We will give to you, not that you will punish us without it, but because we want the very best for ourselves and we know that wanting the best for ourselves is wanting to

be as close as we possibly can to the God who loves us.

Wanting the best for ourselves is understanding that only one knows what that best is – and that one is God. The God who knows us better than we know ourselves. The God who knows how we're going to react even before that reaction has entered our mind. The God who knows the words on our tongues before they are said. The God who was present at the very beginning when our lives first began. The God who knit us together in the womb, who has journeyed with us since our first cries and will journey long after our last cries and breath.

I remember for many, many years standing in church making these promises half-heartedly, "O God I will give you everything – well maybe, provided I get to say what goes on". "I am no longer my own – but yes I am." And I might have thought that was happiness, that that was contentment, that that was what God wanted me to be and do, because I thought I knew best. Looking back that was a life being half lived.

A life half-lived is not life. Life where we learn to trust God is one where we can experience the fullness of life. That doesn't mean that difficult things won't happen. It means that we know that when they do, God is sat all next to us, that sometimes it is God carrying us. That in the difficult times it's God whom we lean on. Just as in the good times, it is God who sings with us, who parties with us, who hugs us, who encourages us, who celebrates with us.

Covenant is about deepening that relationship with God, so that this day and every day we may know more and more of who God is; and we may learn more and more of who God created us to be, that at the end of our lives or at the end of time, we may return to the love of God, not having endured life, not having survived this life; but having thrived in this life. Thrived because

we have known ourselves to be the children of God. Thrived because we have known God as that all-loving parent, who not only journeys with us, but who gave us life; who birthed us; who journeys with us and declares again and again his love for us.

Siblings in Christ I implore you, as these words are said; it may be that you have said them many, many times before and it may be that you said them half-heartedly hoping they'll go away; well I encourage you this time, this time make them count. This time say them with your heart and not just your mouth, say them with your mind and not just reading them with your eyes. Let them be your promises to God.

Maybe you said these once upon a time years ago and meant it and now you're not quite sure. I encourage you to say let them be your promises. Give yourself to God for God loves you.

Maybe you've stumbled on this video, maybe you were just wondering what is this thing called Covenant and just stumbled in. Welcome! Welcome to this wonderful relationship with God. Welcome in joining with us as we say these promises. Welcome into the knowledge that you are a child of God and part of the family of the Church.

I encourage you from the very depths of my heart and my soul, come on this journey where we declare that God is in charge. It is a wonderful journey, that will end at the foot of a cross, knowing beyond knowing the whole fullness of the love of God. It is a journey that will end in eternity, in the worship of God, fully known by the God who loves us, who declares that love throughout eternity, and who calls us to respond in loving trust. Amen

1. **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.**
2. **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 let me be;
be thou in me dwelling, and I one with thee.**
3. **Be thou my breastplate, my sword for the
fight;
be thou my whole armour, be thou my true
might;
be thou my soul's shelter, be thou my strong
tower:
O raise thou me heavenward, great Power
of my power.**
4. **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.**
5. **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 (1880–1931)

versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860–1935) (alt.)

THE COVENANT

We turn to our Covenant itself and you're invited to join with us in the words in bold as we Covenant again to God.

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.

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.

MWB p 289 (B)

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.**

Silence

Hymn: StF 513 – Take this moment, sign and space

- 1. Take this moment, sign, and space;
take my friends around;
here among us make the place
where your love is found.**
- 2. Take the time to call my name,
take the time to mend
who I am and what I've been,
all I've failed to tend.**
- 3. Take the tiredness of my days,
take my past regret,
letting your forgiveness touch
all I can't forget.**
- 4. Take the little child in me,
scared of growing old;
help me here to find my worth
made in Christ's own mould.**
- 5. Take my talents, take my skills,
take what's yet to be;
let my life be yours, and yet,
let it still be me.**

John L. Bell (*b.* 1949) and Graham Maule (*b.* 1958)

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.

PRAYERS AND DISMISSAL

Prayer & blessing

MWB p 291 The Peace

The Lord has made an everlasting covenant of peace with his people.

The peace of the Lord be always with you.
And also with you.

The Lord's Prayer

And as our Saviour taught his disciples, we pray:

**Our Father who art in heaven
hallowed be thy name;
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation;
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power and the
glory,
for ever and ever.
Amen**

Our closing hymn is 'Love Divine all loves excelling'.

Hymn: StF 513 – Love Divine, all loves excelling (4 verses)

1. **Love Divine, all loves excelling
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all thy faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, thou art all compassion,
pure unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation,
Enter every trembling heart.**
2. **Breathe, O breathe thy loving Spirit
into every troubled breast,
let us all in thee inherit,
let us find our second rest.
Take away our love of sinning,
Alpha and Omega be,
end of faith, as its beginning,
set our hearts at liberty.**
3. **Come, Almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray and praise thee without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.**
4. **Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.
Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.**

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

MWB p 296

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

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

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StF 513 – Take this moment, sign and space

John L. Bell (*b.* 1949) and Graham Maule (*b.* 1958)

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StF 64 – Praise is rising, eyes are turning to you

Brenton Brown and Paul Baloche

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StF 636 – O love that wilt not let me go

George Matheson (1842–1906)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 636.

StF 545 – Be thou my vision

Irish, 8th century

translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880–1931)

versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860–1935) (*alt.*)

Reproduced from *Singing the Faith* Electronic Words Edition, number 545.

StF 513 – Love Divine, all loves excelling (4 verses)

Charles Wesley (1707–1788)

Bible Verses

NRSV & NRSVA

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