

# Salford Methodist Circuit



**The Heart Of The Matter - Covenant Service- 10th January 2021**

**Rev Andrew Lunn**

Blessings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It's really good to be here to lead worship with you today, you've gathered from around the Salford Methodist Circuit. For those of you don't know me, I'm Andrew Lunn and I'm Chair of the Manchester and Stockport Methodist District - that means that I have some responsibility and oversight for the large family of churches of which you are part, about 130 congregations gathered round the area.

As we meet today we come for our Covenant Service and this is a service which goes back to the time of John Wesley, when he invited the members of the first Methodist societies to gather at the beginning of a year, to renew their covenant relationship with God. We do the same today and, as we have done for many years, we do this on a Sunday near the beginning of the new year.

Just a few things about the particular order of service we're using today. First of all, there will be some hymns and if you're by yourself at home you're warmly invited to join in with them by singing along. For one of our hymns - the covenant hymn, 'Come, let us use the grace divine, Charles Wesley's hymn - we will just read the words and there will be a piece of music for reflection playing while you read them. We would normally finish the Covenant Service with an order for Holy Communion and of course we're not able to do that today. However, we will have an extended prayer of thanksgiving at the end of the service and as we give thanks together we will be giving thanks for that unshakable love of God which holds us and makes us able to take this step of commitment today. And so as we come together in worship, our first hymn is 'Be thou my vision, O Lord of my heart'

## **Hymn: Be Thou My Vision**

*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 let me be;  
be thou in me dwelling, and lone with thee.*

*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.*

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*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.*

Let us pray.

Blessed be God the Father, whose love for us is constant and unshakable.

***Blessed be God for ever.***

Blessed be Jesus Christ, who, out of love for all creation, left behind the riches of heaven for the poverty of the stable.

***Blessed be God for ever.***

Blessed be the Holy Spirit, who enlivens, sustains, and transforms us as members of the body of Christ.

***Blessed be God for ever.***

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

***Amen.***

Almighty God you have made us for yourself  
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.  
Pour your love into our hearts and draw us to yourself.  
And so bring us at last to your heavenly city  
where we shall see you face to face.  
Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

***Amen***

*A reading from the Law.*

*Deuteronomy 29, beginning to read at verse 10.*

*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, your children, your women, and the aliens who are in your camp, both those who cut your wood and those who draw your water— to enter into the covenant of the Lord your God, sworn by an oath, which the Lord your God is making with you today; in order that he may establish you today*

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*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. I am making this covenant, sworn by an oath, not only with you who stand here with us today before the Lord our God, 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, chapter 31, beginning to read at verse 31*

*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. 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. 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. 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.*

*Paul's Letter to the church in Rome, chapter 12, beginning to read at verse 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. 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: All I Once Held Dear**

*All I once held dear,  
built my life upon,  
all this world reveres,  
and wars to own,  
all I once thought gain  
I have counted loss;  
spent and worthless now,*

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*compared to this.*

*Knowing you, Jesus,  
knowing you,  
there is no greater thing.  
You're my all, you're the best,  
you're my joy, my righteousness,  
and I love you, Lord.*

*Now my heart's desire  
is to know you more,  
to be found in you  
and known as yours.  
To possess by faith  
what I could not earn,  
all-surpassing gift  
of righteousness.  
Knowing you, Jesus...*

*Oh, to know the power  
of your risen life,  
and to know you in  
your sufferings.  
To become like you  
in your death, my Lord,  
so with you to live  
and never die.  
Knowing you, Jesus...*

*A reading from the Gospel according to Mark, chapter 14, beginning to read at verse 22.*

Hear the Gospel of Christ.

**Glory to Christ our Saviour.**

*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.' Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it. He said to them, 'This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many. 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.**

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Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our rock and our liberator.

Amen.

We don't live in easy times do we? We live in a time of huge challenge and change, a time of pandemic, a time of climate change, a time when all sorts of things are coming to challenge us. We are not the first Christians to live in such times, there have been those before who lived through times of immense social change, those who've lived through plague and illness but these are challenging times and they are difficult. And then we come to covenant and to our Covenant Service and this too is not easy. It's not a service written for the faint-hearted. It's not a service which is written for those who are young in their faith. It asks much of us and we do well to stop and pause and think about what we are about to say and do. And yet what covenant does, I think, is it goes right to the heart of the matter, the heart of who we are. Just as running a marathon asks a lot of your whole body but particularly of your heart, so saying the Covenant Prayer asks a lot of us and particularly of our heart. Because our heart is not just a pneumatic muscle pump in our body pumping blood around, it is also the centre, the core of who and what we are. The kernel of our being. The seat of the soul.

So covenant is not easy and it asks a lot of us and it takes us right to the heart of the matter and the heart of the matter is God's love. God's love for us. To use the Old Testament word it is that 'hesed', that steadfast, enduring love which continues. And through all the difficulties that the ancient Hebrew people faced and through all their turns away from God, yet God's love for them endured and we hear here in Jeremiah something of that continuing love as God announces the possibility of a new covenant. A new covenant in which God's law would be written on their hearts, written on the very core of who they are. The covenant would change them, would transform them because then written on their hearts would be that law which God desired of them and for them.

We might recognize that God does not need the law. It is God's law but it is, it is there for humans. And it is there to express God's desire for us that we might be those who love God and love our neighbour and love one another and even, by God's grace, come to love ourselves. And when the law is written on our hearts what is written there is God's desire for us. God's desire that we should be people who live and learn and grow and are sustained in love. That is the heart of the matter and it becomes the heart of our matter, the heart of who we are.

Now it's very important to recognize that when we say these words, we need to recognize that in the covenant God's intention for all of us is liberative. God desires to set us free. Sometimes God desires to set us free from our own sin, sometimes he desires to set us free from the sins of others, but when we come to say those words:

'Let me be full

Let me be empty

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Let me have all things

Let me have nothing

Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you'

it is really important that we recognize their liberative intent, that God longs to set us free.

To those of you who are black or from other ethnic minorities, I would say to you very clearly that there is no place in this for asking God to help you to endure the racism of our society. 'Let me be empty' is not about that because God's desire is for you to be liberated from that racism.

And to women among you, especially any of you who have ever experienced domestic violence or violence at the hands of a man, I would say to you this is not to do with putting up with it. God's desire is that you might be liberated from such things, liberated from violence, liberated from oppression, and that goes for every one of us wherever we might find ourselves in a position of being oppressed. 'Let me be full, let me be empty' is never going to be a prayer which simply leaves us where we are, struggling in the midst of other people's sin. And neither, for those of us who might find ourselves among the privileged, is it to leave us with our privilege or with our sense of being able to just carry on with life as if nothing mattered. We are to be liberated from other things within us; maybe from our selfishness, from our blindness, from our indifference.

So as God writes his desire on our hearts, it is his desire that we might know his love and we might know his liberating intent for us and when we come to say the covenant we say it with that as the foundation of what we are trying to be and do.

One last thing about having God's desire for us written on our hearts. You see I believe that what that does to us, the transformation it works in us, is to turn us into God's love letters to the world. We have now got God's love for us written onto our hearts and that changes us into those who are ready and willing to witness to that love by showing it to others. And we go out because our hearts have been written on as those who are a message to the world, those who are sent, an apostolic church. So as we come to this Covenant I invite you to stop. Be silent, and pray and think about the ways in which God desires to liberate you in love so that you might be his message to the world around you.

[Silence]

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 it's power and be united in love and obedience.

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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 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 my guilt,  
and cleanse me from my sin.**

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**Create in me a new 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.**

## **[Music]**

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,  
let us again accept our place within this covenant  
which God has made with us  
and 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,***



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*in all that I do  
and in all that I may endure;  
when there is work for me  
and when there is none;  
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 are  
gathered in his name you will grant what they ask.  
Answer now your servants' prayers

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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.**

I invite you as you are able, and if you wish to, to stand for the words of the  
Thanksgiving

God is with us wherever we are.

**The Spirit is among us in our many places.**

From grateful hearts we give thanks.

**Out of our need we come to God**

**who will fill our hearts:**

**the giver of all that is good,**

**the fullness of all that flourishes,**

**and the beginning and end of everything.**

God of Jesus, God of all,  
when you made everything  
you placed at the kernel of creation  
your enduring and perfect love;  
you made a world for us to enjoy with you,  
to thrill our heart and fill us with wonder.

**You are our God. You are our all.**

Out of slavery and oppression  
you brought your people,  
giving them a law written on stone  
to guard them in the wilderness  
and guide them to a home  
flowing with promise.

**You are our God. You are our all.**

When they took to heart other gods  
and other powers  
you did not abandon them,  
but sent prophets to call them back to you,  
and gave a promise  
to write your divine desire for them on their hearts.

**You are our God. You are our all.**

And then you sent your Son to us,  
to inhabit human communities,  
to show that you had never left us,  
and to accompany us on a journey back to you,  
for you yourself are our heart and habitation,

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who thrills our soul and fills us with wonder.

**You are our God. You are our all.**

And so,  
with all those who would be heart-broken without you,  
with those who long for Christ  
and those who rest with him,  
with those who hunger for his Spirit  
and those who live in it,  
we join in praise.

**Holy, holy, holy God.**

**Self-giving in creation.**

**Generous in redemption.**

**Just in completion.**

**Hosanna in the highest!**

**Blessed is the one who comes in your name.**

**Hosanna in the highest!**

We live in a time of pandemic and it has been a time of great difficulty for many of us. For some a time of bereavement and sorrow, for others a time of isolation and loneliness. In all kinds of ways we, and others around us have struggled. And yet we believe that God's love for us continues and we're going to finish our service with a hymn of thanksgiving, written by Martin Rinkart, the Lutheran pastor of the Saxony town of Eilenburg during the 17th century. Rinkart himself lived in a time of plague. during the 30 Year War, Eilenburg became a refuge for many people and, in that context, it became overcrowded. A number of times illness and plague struck the city, but particularly in 1637. At the end of that year Rinkart found himself the only pastor left in the town. He had taken hundreds of funerals that year, among them that of his own wife. And yet out of that time of suffering and pain and difficulty, Rinkart held fast to his faith and was able to write this hymn we will sing now, as a mark of our continuing trust and gratitude to God: 'Now thank we all our God, with hearts and hands and voices.'

## **Hymn: Now Thank We All Our Lord**

Now thank we all our God,  
with hearts and hands and voices,  
who wondrous things has done,  
in whom this world rejoices;  
who from our mothers' arms  
has blessed us on our way  
with countless gifts of love,  
and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God



through all our life be near us,  
with ever joyful hearts  
and blessed peace to cheer us;  
and keep us in his grace,  
and guide us when perplexed,  
and free us from all ills  
in this world and the next.

All praise and thanks to God  
the Father now be given,  
the Son, and him who reigns  
with them in highest heaven,  
the one eternal God,  
whom earth and heaven adore,  
for thus it was, is now,  
and shall be evermore.

So our time of worship comes to an end. And as it does so we're going to use again the collect I used earlier on which draws on the words of St Augustine, taken from his confessions in which he says:

Lord, you have made us for yourself  
and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

So my prayer for you at this time would be you might know what it is to feel that restlessness for God and that you'll go forward into the new year not so much with a sense of needing to keep new year's resolutions, as with a sense of God's eternal, enduring love for you going with you. And so that whatever happens this year, whatever events it has yet to hide, you will know that you are not alone.

Let us pray:

Almighty God, you have made us for yourself  
and our hearts are restless  
until they find their rest in you.  
Pour you love into our hearts  
and draw us to yourself  
and so bring us at last to your heavenly city  
where we shall see you face to face.  
Through Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord  
who is alive and reigns with you,  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
one God, now and forever.

The blessing of God,  
Holy Spirit, Word made flesh,  
and Source of all being,  
live in your hearts and abide with you always.

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***Amen.***

Go, live in peace,  
and love and serve the Lord.

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

Be thou my vision  
Irish, 8th century; translated by Mary Elizabeth Byrne (1880-1931) versified by Eleanor Henrietta Hull (1860-1935) (alt.)

All I once held dear  
Graham Kendrick (b. 1950)

Come, let us use  
Charles Wesley (1707-1788)

Now thank we all  
Martin Rinkart (1586-1649) translated by Catherine Winkworth (1827-1878)

Music  
Here am I, Lord  
Music by Keith Duke Recording: Keith Duke, Geoffrey Nobes, Margaret Rizza & Kevin Mayhew Ltd

Depth Ambient    Library Of The Human Soul & Gabriel Brosteanu

Order of service, including the covenant prayer itself and accompanying prayers  
The Methodist Worship Book

Collect (for the Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity) based on the words of St Augustine of Hippo  
The Church of England

Opening prayers and Thanksgiving  
Andrew Lunn