



The Methodist Church

United Stockport Circuit (Manchester and Stockport District)

A Message from the Superintendent Minister

January 5th 2021

My Dear Friends,

Whilst I want to wish you all a very Happy New Year, it is with deep regret that I write having just heard the news of yet another National Lockdown. Some of us were fortunate enough to have been able to attend services in person over the Christmas period. Others were beginning to think that in the New Year this might become a possibility for them once again. And whilst the promise of a vaccine allows us to think that the end might be in sight, we are yet again faced with the challenge to 'Stay Home, Save Lives, Protect the NHS.' Whilst places of worship do not have to close – as we did during the first national lockdown – many of the churches in our Circuit have regrettably taken the decision to close our doors for the foreseeable future. Where this decision has been taken it has not been taken lightly of course, and it relates to the capacity of churches to offer worship safely without putting pressure on stewards and preachers and worship leaders to be present when they feel that it is in their best interests and those of their families to isolate. It is really important at this time that we support and respect one another in the personal decisions we are all having to make. We would all love all our churches to be open but with limited personnel and resources it may not always be possible.

One consequence of this early January lockdown is that many churches are having to postpone annual Covenant Services. The traditional Methodist Covenant service - which is also beloved in a whole range of other Christian denominations too - stems from the time of John Wesley himself. Wesley saw the need for a regular opportunity and ceremony to enable people to open themselves to God more fully. He looked for some means of helping people to hear God's offer and challenge ever more deeply, and to allow God to prompt and enable them to respond. The Covenant Service that we celebrate today evolved from that conviction, reminding us about the extraordinary and miraculous things which are made possible within the life and the love of God, made known to us in Jesus Christ. It is ironic that at a time when we perhaps need to be reminded of these things more than ever that our Covenant services cannot take place. As soon as we can, we will plan Covenant Services in those churches which have not been able to hold them, but for now I want to use this space to offer a few reflections, particularly upon the very special Covenant Prayer. Let me remind you of it, and you may wish to say it prayerfully to yourself at this time, and commit yourself to all that it represents, even though you are not able to participate in the full liturgy and ceremony within

the presence of the wider faith community and congregation. I have re-produced the traditional words here, rather than the modern version which we often use these days:

**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.**

Perhaps more than ever this year we can identify with the sense of suffering, of being laid aside and brought low, of being empty. For many people, the Covid-19 situation has left them, literally, with nothing. Poverty, hunger, loneliness, unemployment, grief and loss of all kinds, all these things have come into sharp focus over the last 10 months. And more than ever it is important to recognise that the Covenant prayer is not *asking* God to inflict these things on us. Rather it is recognising that life takes many and varied turns, some of which are easier to follow, understand and bear than others. In saying the prayer we are expressing our faith that no matter what, we believe that God is with us, and that with God's help, we can be the people God wants us to be as we face these trials.

As the preface to the service in the Methodist Worship Book reminds us, "*The emphasis on the whole service is on God's readiness to enfold us in generous love, not dependent on our deserving. Our response, also in love, springs with penitent joy from thankful recognition of God's Grace.*"

In Old Testament times, in the face of great misery, the people of God clung on to their understanding of a God who was so tied to them that he would ultimately liberate them. They began to talk about a Covenant, which was their way of expressing their belief that God would come through for them in their time of sorrow and need. And throughout the ages it has been the experience of individuals and groups or nations of people who have lived through difficult and turbulent experiences that God is a God who is committed to deliverance and freedom. For us today these stories of liberation can be uplifting and inspiring and a source of hope, as we live through our own version of exile. Later on, in the New Testament, we hear about a New Covenant, centred on

the life and death and resurrection of Jesus Christ; it promises new life for all in Jesus, new hope and new possibility, as we live to love one another just as God loves us. And it is in the light of that promise in which we live today, and in our annual Covenant service we take the opportunity to remind ourselves that no matter what else is happening or changing in the world, one thing will always remain the same: God has promised to love us and to care about us.

And all this is freely given. It is not a Covenant in the sense that we often use the word today – some kind of two way deal, in which I will do something for you, if you do something for me. It is not a contract in which God and human beings agree to provide particular goods and services for each other. The Covenant is not something that we have to do to create a relationship with God. God has freely, unconditionally and graciously already made that relationship possible. No, this is an unconditional covenant, in which God simply offers Godself to us, and in that, the Covenant is the means of grace through which we can become more fully aware of and accepting of the relationship and then seek to sustain it through the way we choose to live our lives.

So please, do read or speak the words of the Covenant Prayer and allow them to touch you and challenge you in whatever way they will at this time. Take peace and courage from the knowledge that God is with us, has always been with us and will always be with us. Trust that God has not willed these times on us, but rather is sharing our frustrations and concerns and pain and is holding us in all that, that we might make discoveries and see things afresh as we seek to do God's perfect will.

With love and thanks to you all for the many greetings and messages of goodwill I have received from so many of you over the last few weeks. May the coming year bring peace and hope into our lives, and into the world. And please remember as always, as we continue to live with lockdown measures:

In this time of isolation and separation may we feel the unity of God's spirit in the bonds of peace and love which connect us to one another.

- **When we feel lonely let us know that in Christ we are never alone.**
- **When we feel isolated may we be reminded that within the worldwide Body of Christ we are always connected.**
- **When we need a hug help us to feel the warmth of God's embrace**
- **When we are compelled to keep our distance, may we be drawn close to each other within the Spirit of Companionship that flows from God and which moves through and between each one of us.**

With love and blessings, ***Rev Cathy.***

NOTICES

Worship

See your local church notices for details but for the time being we are continuing our Circuit wide Zoom service at 3pm on Sundays.

Login details as usual as follows:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87212246881?pwd=VXpyMzRYV21UZ1ZoYlkc2R4dmV1QT09>

Meeting ID: 872 1224 6881 Password: 974333

Circuit Prayer

As we enter a further lockdown, let's continue to say this prayer together when we can, at 11am on a Sunday morning. This way we stay connected in a very really and tangible way with all those who are not yet able to come back to church. You can also read more about each church on the Circuit Website www.stockportcircuit.org.uk

God of Love and Life, we pray to you this morning for the life the United Stockport Methodist Circuit, for our sisters and brothers who belong to:

(pausing briefly to reflect after each name)

Christ Church Methodist /URC , Dialstone Lane Methodist Church , Davenport Methodist Church , Edgeley Community Church , Hazel Grove Methodist Church, Heaton Mersey Methodist , Heaton Moor United Church, Jubilee Methodist Church, (Marple Bridge), Marple Methodist Church, The Ridge Methodist Church, (Marple), Romiley Methodist Church, St. Johns Methodist Church, (Cheadle Heath), Tiviot Dale Methodist Church (centre of Stockport), Trinity Methodist Church, (Bramhall Lane), Windlehurst Methodist Church (High Lane), Woodley Methodist Church

We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory. We ask that this time of crisis might pass and that those who suffer might find comfort and strength within the knowledge of your grace, revealed through the kindness and compassion of the people of God. Eternal God, though the self-offering of your Son you have filled our lives with your presence. Help us in our sufferings and trials. Fill us with hope and strengthen us in our weakness. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.
