

5th February 2021

Dear Friends,

I hope that this letter finds you well, and as always I wonder how you are this week, please accept my apologies for not writing last week but I was unwell and had some family issues to deal with. I would like to share a part of that with you, my son Christopher was admitted to the LGI for a cardiac catheter investigation last Friday, as it turns out all was well and he is well, but that hasn't always been his story. I would like to share with you some of his reflections from a recent blog post of his, returning to the theme of Covenant again:

Last Sunday I took part in our Methodist Church Circuit's Covenant Service on Zoom. As part of the service, I shared what the covenant means to me. I shared about how I have come into Methodism from a varied denominational background, and that in all my experience of other churches I had never come across a service quite like the Methodist Covenant Service. I explained that I have always felt a bit of a special connection with God during these services, that by reciting this prayer I am recognising that my relationship with God is more than a statement of faith, but it is a two-way interaction between God and myself that is ever changing and evolving.

When it came to discussing with the group after I had shared my piece, I was challenged when one of the people with me expressed their difficulty with parts of the prayer and explained that there are some parts that she struggles to say. Other people who were part of the group agreed and explained that there are some people from their churches who will not attend for the covenant service. Listening to these responses I could understand why some might find it difficult after all the language is incredibly challenging. It reads as a very sacrificial prayer, the first line in particular which reads, "I am no longer my own but yours," can convey a sense of loss of control and likewise the following lines can be read as though we a pawn being moved about on a chess board. I also understand why people may feel that it is too much to promise, so they would rather not make a promise they do not feel they can keep. While I understand these interpretations, I do not hold to them. However, that does not mean I have not had my own struggles with the prayer.

The parts of the prayer I have particularly struggled with are, "put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for you or laid aside for you." Living a congenital heart condition there have been times when due to ill health I have suffered and been incapacitated. Without going into detail on my experiences I can say that during this time the idleness I experienced and the suffering from the medical problems caused me to question what it means to say, "put me to doing" when I couldn't really do anything and why on earth would I pray "put me to suffering and what could possibly be achieved through it? (If you want to hear more about this experience I have written my testimony from this time and it can be found at, https://sallysjourney.typepad.com/sallys_journey/2008/01/christophers-st.html) The other times I have really struggled with the covenant prayer is when I have found myself unemployed. The worse instance was when I was living in Newcastle and found myself out of work for nearly a year. During this time praying, "let me be employed for you or laid aside for you," at the time this felt like a gut punch, the best way to describe it was by saying that praying this made me feel devalued as a person because of the situation I found myself in. However, I do believe these experiences tempered me and helped to prepare me for current and future ministry.

So, what is my view in light of these experiences? To begin with my view is based in how I understand covenant. For me covenant is how we experience our relationship with God. This is how people throughout the Bible experienced their relationship with God. In Genesis 15 when God seals the covenant with Abraham, Abraham sacrifices animals which God then passes between. Traditionally at this time when two parties had formed a covenant such as this, they would both walk between the sacrificed animals as a sign before God or the gods they believed in that they would keep the promises they had made. However, in the passage God puts Abraham into a deep sleep so he is unable to pass through the sacrifices with Him. God knew that Abraham and his descendants would not be able to keep the promises, so he freed them from being bound to them. However, God still bound Himself to the promises He made Abraham so that he could live in relationship with God. In the New Covenant Jesus is both the sacrifice and the one who passes through them in our places which means we now experience life in relationship with God through the grace of God demonstrated by Jesus on the cross. God knows that even with the best of intentions we cannot live up

to the promises we make in faith but despite this he still loves us and values us, and he wants us to know Him and know that love.

I also believe that covenant in this sense puts the promises we make in the Methodist Covenant Service into perspective. Knowing that I am loved and valued by God in this way means that this is where I find my identity. The times where I struggled before were because I had placed my value and identity in what I could do or what job I had. I now know that regardless what I do or how other people rank me, my identity is found in my faith in God. I believe that in everything I do and experience God is with me to comfort and support me in times of struggle and rejoice and celebrate with me when all is well. I believe this covenant prayer reflects this."

I suspect that we all have struggles with prayer, and maybe particularly the Covenant Prayer which starts with those amazing and grounding words "I am no longer my own but yours". I was thinking about this as I pondered this weeks lectionary readings, and was struck particularly by the passage in Isaiah where God points out that the ways of the divine are mysterious and so often beyond us, and whilst we are a valued, loved and cherished part of the creators design there is so much more than we can see. In these days of pandemic perhaps it helps us to step back and take in a wider view, a global view, or even a cosmic view. Perhaps that is where Mother Julian of Norwich, who also lived through a time of pandemic (the black death) was able to draw upon a well of wisdom and declare **"All will be well, and all will be well and all manner of things will be well."** It is worth looking up her story if you don't know it. Isaiah 40 invites us into this mystery:

*Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;
who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.*

*Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.*

*Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
'My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God'?
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;*

*his understanding is unsearchable.
He gives power to the faint,
and strengthens the powerless.
Even youths will faint and be weary,
and the young will fall exhausted;
but those who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength,
they shall mount up with wings like eagles,
they shall run and not be weary,
they shall walk and not faint.*

(Isaiah 40: 21-31)

These words of Isaiah are both grounding in reality and deeply comforting, we are invited to wait, to rest, be in God's presence. As Christopher shared; "Knowing that I am loved and valued by God in this way means that this is where I find my identity." So I leave you with those thought and the words of a hymn:

*Strength will rise as we wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord
We will wait upon the Lord*

*Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary*

*Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary*

*You're the defender of the weak
You comfort those in need
You lift us up on wings like eagles*

Like eagles

*Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer*

*Our God, You reign forever
Our hope, our Strong Deliverer
You are the everlasting God
The everlasting God
You do not faint
You won't grow weary*

*You're the defender of the weak
You comfort those in need
You lift us up on wings like eagles*

As always, please be in touch if you would like to talk. Many blessings



Reverend Sally Coleman