



Welcome

Today we gather to worship God as we share in our annual Covenant Service. A time when we re-commit ourselves to deepening our relationship with God and when we recognise that God commits to sustaining us, guiding us and equipping us for life in God's service whatever circumstance we face.

We have all been hit afresh this week by the ongoing realization that daily life will continue to be a struggle in so many ways for some time yet. Our first song this morning reminds us that God is the source of the light, love, peace and restoration that we so need at present and for that we offer God the praise of our lips and our hearts.

Song

*My lips shall praise you,
My great Redeemer;
My heart will worship
Almighty Saviour.*

Love that conquers every fear,
In the midst of trouble you draw near,
You are the restorer of my soul.
My lips shall praise you...

You take all my guilt away,
Turn the darkest night to brightest day,
You are the restorer of my soul.
My lips shall praise you...

You're the source of happiness,
Bringing peace when I am in distress,
You are the restorer of my soul.
My lips shall praise you...

Prayers & Collect

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.

Blessed 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.

Blessed 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.

Blessed be God for ever.

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

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.**

Introduction to the Theme

Reading

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." He said to them, "When you pray, say: Father, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Give us each day our daily bread. And forgive us our sins, for we ourselves forgive everyone indebted to us. And do not bring us to the time of trial."

And he said to them, "Suppose one of you has a friend, and you go to him at midnight and say to him, 'Friend, lend me three loaves of bread; for a friend of mine has arrived, and I have nothing to set before him.' And he answers from within, 'Do not bother me; the door has already been locked, and my children are with me in bed; I cannot get up and give you anything.' I tell you, even though he will not get up and give him anything because he is his friend, at least because of his persistence he will get up and give him whatever he needs.

"So I say to you, Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door

will be opened. Is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for a fish, will give a snake instead of a fish? Or if the child asks for an egg, will give a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!" (Luke 11: 1 – 13)

Reflection

Rev Tim Perkins: "We will pray daily"
The videos can be viewed at www.burleymethodist.org
Alternatively, the written text is provided below

Song

Even though I walk through the valley
Of the shadow of death,
Your perfect love is casting out fear.
And even when I'm caught in the middle
Of the storm of this life,
I won't turn back; I know you are near.
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?
*Oh no, you never let go,
Through the calm and through the storm.
Oh no, you never let go,
In every high and every low.
Oh no, you never let go,
Lord, you never let go of me.*

And I can see a light that is coming
For the heart that holds on,
A glorious light beyond all compare.
And there will be an end to these troubles,
But until that day comes,
We'll live to know you here on the earth.
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me.
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?
Whom then shall I fear?
Oh no, you never let go...

Yes, I can see a light that is coming
For the heart that holds on,
And there will be an end to these troubles,
But until that day comes,
Still I will praise you, still I will praise you.

Prayer of Confession

Let us seek forgiveness for the sin by which we have denied God's claim upon us:
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

We pray together, saying:

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, cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Therefore to all who truly repent this is God's gracious word: 'Your sins are forgiven.'
Amen. Thanks be to God.

The renewal of the Covenant

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.

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, in all that I do and in all that I may endure; when there is work for me and when there is none; when I am troubled and when I am at peace.

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.

The Lord's Prayer (sung)

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.

Prayers of Intercession

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.**

The Peace

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

The peace of the Lord be always with you. Amen.

Song

O thou who camest from above
The pure celestial fire to impart,
Kindle a flame of sacred love
On the mean altar of my heart!

There let it for thy glory burn
With inextinguishable blaze,
And trembling to its source return,
In humble prayer and fervent praise.

Jesus, confirm my heart's desire
To work, and speak, and think for thee;
Still let me guard the holy fire,
And still stir up thy gift in me –

Ready for all thy perfect will,
My acts of faith and love repeat,
Till death thy endless mercies seal,
And make the sacrifice complete.

Blessing

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.**

Reflection: “We will pray daily.”

Rev Tim Perkins

The Methodist Covenant Prayer can often feel somewhat transactional in nature. We are submitting ourselves to God’s will and God will decide what we should or should not do. When seen in that light it feels rather legalistic and leads only to a Pharisaic way of life where we must do certain things to ensure that God is pleased with us.

The key to a better understanding of this prayer lies in its penultimate line: “*Glorious and blessed God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, you are mine and I am yours.*” “You are mine and I am yours” – that has a more relational feel to it, don’t you think? This Covenant is perhaps most akin to the one that two people enter when they get married. Contrary to popular opinion, that relationship is less about what jobs each party must do to keep the other happy – like taking the bins out or cleaning the bathroom – and more about how the love and trust between them can grow on a daily basis.

So, at the start of this New Year, as we approach the reaffirmation of our Covenant with God, let us do so from the perspective of committing to deepen our relationship with God – to get to know God better and through so doing come to love and trust God more.

Over the next few weeks, we are going to explore a tool that the Methodist Church is giving to us for just such a purpose. You may be familiar with it already because our District was the guinea pig for the pilot project which is now being launched all around the country. It is called a “Methodist Way of Life,” and it details several different commitments we are asked to make which will enable our relationship with God to go deeper. It splits into four sections: Worship, Learning & Caring, Service, and Evangelism and each section has 3 aspects. For this series sermon notes have been written by numerous preachers from around the country. Today, we shall consider very briefly, the first aspect, the commitment for which is: “*with God’s help we will pray daily.*” I am grateful to Jill Baker, a former Vice-president of the Methodist Conference for her notes which have enabled me to reflect upon this theme.

Several people responding to the pilot project admitted that what troubles them about this first commitment is not the word ‘*pray*’, but the word ‘*daily*’, so that is what I want to think about. Think for a moment of all the different things you do daily – you wake up, you get up, you wash and brush your teeth, you dress, you eat, you go about your daily business, whatever that may be. Some of it you do consciously. Some of it just happens. And all the time, you are breathing! Breathing is an involuntary part of daily life. We only ever stop to think about it if we deliberately try to hold our breath. I wonder might we find this commitment less daunting if we thought of prayer as an essential, even involuntary, part of daily life?

Throughout Scripture, the word “*daily*” is used in a few different contexts. In Exodus 5 the Israelite slaves are oppressed by the demand for the same levels of daily productivity even when straw is not provided for them to make bricks – is this sometimes how we think about daily prayer? An impossible target which can only make us weary and feel as though we have failed?

Many passages refer to daily offerings and several deal with daily wages or providing people’s daily needs. Perhaps each of these have something to say about prayer too, but I will focus on two small yet significant references to daily activity. These are ‘*daily listening*’ and ‘*daily asking*’. Our passage from Luke that Liz shared with us helps us to reflect on the idea of “*daily asking*.” But there is a short passage that Jalna will share with us now from Proverbs 8 that will help us consider the practice of daily listening:

Reading: Proverbs 8: 32 – 36

“And now, my children, listen to me: happy are those who keep my ways. Hear instruction and be wise, and do not neglect it. Happy is the one who listens to me, watching daily at my gates, waiting beside my doors. For whoever finds me finds life and obtains favour from the LORD; but those who miss me injure themselves; all who hate me love death.”

In that lovely extract God describes the happiness of those who are attentive to God, listening, watching and waiting daily at God’s gates and doors – that is, at the entry points of life. Seeing this passage as a description of prayer could be so liberating. This sort of living, or praying, is about listening to and seeking after God, not about a system or a set of rules.

Rowan Williams once used the image of sunbathing to illustrate how we encounter God in prayer: you just relax and let it happen, he said. In the book “*The Five Means of Grace*” Elaine Heath describes prayer as “*gazing into the face of Jesus who gazes back with infinite love.*” She reminds us that it’s not possible for God to lose or diminish God’s love expressed to each one of us, and that we can safely let down our guard – the guard that often keeps God at a distance – through expressing vulnerability, trust and honesty to God. “*Prayer is the very breath of God, breathing life into us, opening us up to who God is, to who we are, and to this world that God loves.*”

When we see prayer like this it becomes an experience of unburdening. In the Caribbean and many other parts of the world, it is common to see people – mainly women – carrying enormous baskets on their heads. They may be setting off to work in their farmlands, carrying their tools, food and water for the day – or returning at the end of the day with produce to feed a family. Their poise is remarkable and they negotiate obstacles or rough terrain with grace and ease. But sometimes, if you happen to be looking when the basket is taken from the head

and put down, you can sense a palpable relief at the unburdening. Is that not what prayer can be? The daily unburdening of loads too great to carry?

Through unburdening we allow ourselves simply to rest or sunbathe in God's presence and to soak up the rays of God's love and grace.

But prayer is not just about unburdening ourselves. Our reading from Luke reminds us of the importance of daily asking in our prayer. To carry our breathing metaphor further, perhaps we can understand breathing out as the unburdening, restful nature of simply dwelling in God's presence and allowing God the time and space to work in us and breathing in as inviting God to be present and active in specific ways in our lives and our world.

Prayer is not just for when the sun is shining. It is for the tough times too. Jesus' own practice of prayer includes turning to God when things were hard – when drained, when making hard decisions, in Gethsemane, and in bereavement.

When asked to teach his disciples about prayer, Jesus encouraged them to ask daily for all that they need – bread is cited, but this could stand for a range of needs, it gives strength for the day. Our culture promotes self-sufficiency and independence; it moves us away from the habit of expressing need and asking for help. Maybe that's why some of us find prayer a challenge? But what do we actually need day by day? How is our recognition of need a kind of prayer in itself?

During this pandemic, foodbanks have been more in demand than ever. Perhaps those who came week by week to receive a bag of food that they were not able to choose or pay for expressed better than most the '*poor in spirit*' to whom is given the kingdom of heaven. Just as in the wilderness when manna was given, God's grace comes in small packages which are soon exhausted – precisely so that we will go back and ask for more – '*give us each day Lord, our daily bread...*'.

As Methodists seeking to adopt a '*Methodist Way of Life*', if we are not to stumble at the very first commitment – "*we will pray daily*" – perhaps we need to learn how to listen more and ask more. How might we do that?

Well, it is said that when Mother Theresa was asked what she said to God in prayer she replied, "*I mostly listen*" and when the interviewer went on to ask her what God said to her, she answered, "*He mostly listens*". That kind of listening is powerful and builds a relationship of love that longs for more and more communication between the lovers. Such communication is not a chore, but a delight.

Praying daily may begin with reminding ourselves that God wants to communicate with us at every moment, because of God's great love for us. It's not about technique or accomplishment, it's about opening channels to listen and to ask for what we need, even just for strength for the next breath, or the next step, or the next hour? And it is a spiritual practice that we can engage in at any time and in any context, whether our church buildings are closed or open, whatever situation we find that God has placed us in. Amen.