

HOMILY LENT 2 The Methodist Covenant Prayer

Exploring the way in which different people and cultures experience time, I was fascinated to learn that the world is full of buttons which don't actually do anything. Some of us immediately press pedestrian crossing or 'close door' lift buttons. But, if you have ever suspected that these have limited effect, you may be onto something. I read of an interview with Transport for London in which it became clear that pressing the pedestrian button at some of London's thousands of traffic signals may not *actually* mean that the 'green man' appears any more quickly.

So why do these buttons without functionality exist? In the case of traffic crossings – whilst the lights at some may change automatically, irrespective of our pressing the button, to do so enables accessible features only activated when the button is pressed. But the more widespread reason – and why these are often referred to as 'placebo buttons' - is that they serve a different function altogether, that of enabling us to feel a sense of control and agency. Doing something, even if just pressing a button, usually feels psychologically better than being passive.

Why do I begin with this? Well the past year has been one in which our sense of being able to exercise control has been turned on its head. Frequently I've felt that I am responding to, rather than determining events. This Lent then, the phrases of the Methodist Covenant prayer take on a resonance many of us haven't known in *our* lifetimes.

So what does it mean to pray this prayer in the context of a pandemic; what can we learn from the way in which Jesus seemed to live the tenets of the prayer; and what hope can the prayer give us for Lent and beyond.

You may be familiar with the Covenant prayer and already know that it goes right back to the time of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, himself. From 1755 to this day, in times of stability and calm, of apprehension and of turmoil, Methodists have responded to God's prompting and challenge within the context of a living and loving relationship, a covenant. The traditional Covenant prayer makes clear the depth and breadth of the bond between the believer and God – one which embraces the whole of life. So profound a basis for discipleship is this offering of all, including one's choices to God, that Christians outside of Methodism have also come to value it greatly. I believe the Methodist Covenant prayer, like the Orthodox Jesus Prayer, is one of God's gifts to the whole Church. Here then are the words of the prayer, which are never to be prayed lightly or thoughtlessly:

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.'

This Lent, after almost a year since the pandemic seemed to begin for most of us, we come this prayer in what we've become used to referring to as 'these strange times'. The strangeness of the times is evoked in phrases and concepts which have become woven into our everyday lives over the past year: 'socially-distanced', '2-meter rule', 'furloughed', 'next slide please' and 'you're on mute'. Spoken word artist and poet, Harry Baker captures something even more salutary when he describes 'days when I couldn't answer the simple question 'How are you?'" or other times 'when I felt like my whole world was accidentally stuck on mute'.

Do you remember how, just before the first lock down, we watched amazed at images of shoppers with toilet roll laden trolleys. We may have laughed but a nagging sense that maybe we too should get out there and stock up was hard to dismiss. The resulting empty shelves, despite all the reassurances, created an actual cycle of scarcity driven by our need to bolster our sense of having the things we need under our control. Even in more normal times, many of us place huge value on being able to determine our own path in life. We chaff against that which would interrupt our ability to follow through on our own choices and according to our preferred timetable.

The Covenant Prayer, has then always struck a countercultural note. But this year 'let me be employed for you, or laid aside for you; let me have all things, let me have nothing' seem to take on special significance.

So I've been taken to the way in which the life, ministry and especially the trial and passion of Jesus embody the tenets of the Prayer.

The phrase 'let me be full, let me be empty' reminds me that he, in whom was all the fullness of God, emptied himself. Jesus came amongst us in human likeness, flesh of our flesh, bone of our bone, in obedience and for love.

'Rank me with whom you will' reminds me of the breadth of people for whom Jesus came and whom he brought within his circle. From women who were the targets of crushing moralistic judgements, to wealthy but despised functionaries of the state and, in his death, condemned criminals.

'I am no longer my own but yours' and 'put me to what you will', carry echoes of the prayer Jesus gave to his followers, 'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done' and his own soul-deep prayer in Gethsemene, 'not my will, but yours be done'.

Jesus, in whom the whole vast cosmos is held together, chose to limit himself, to relinquish control and as W.H Vanstone in his book 'The Stature of Waiting' so wonderfully explores, to hand himself over. To the Father and to human hands; 'no longer my own but yours'.

A remarkable feature of the pandemic has been the willingness of so many people to choose limitations for the sake of others, for those whom we love and for strangers. NHS workers and many others have given themselves to serve. For all of us, plans have been put on hold, freedoms curtailed and self-interests laid aside.

It's not easy. But when its proved hard I've noted three things;

Firstly that my usual sense of control is in many ways impermanent and probably illusionary - as Jesus explained in a parable about a rich man who built barns in which to store his great wealth, only to have all his plans up-ended.

Secondly that to be able to enjoy control, self-determination and choice is a mark of privilege not shared by many people around the globe and in this country. It's yet more probing to consider the ways in which my determination to live without restrictions on my lifestyle choices erodes the life choices and even survival of others.

Thirdly to recall that Jesus has walked this way before and does still, saying 'come follow me'.

In this I find hope for the present and the future. Hope because the prayer invites us to a covenant. It doesn't speak of passive fatalism but of agency, which chooses active trust in the One whom we know can be trusted, who has said 'I will be their God and they shall be my people.'

So, now glorious and blessed God,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
You are mine and I am yours.
So be it.