



## Birstall and Rothley Methodist Churches



A Covenant Service; January 10th 2021

This service has been prepared for use at home.



### Opening Prayer

God of new beginnings,  
you patiently lift us up, however many times we fall.  
Help us as we renew our covenant at the start of this new year,  
that we may walk with you in the ways of wisdom, faith and justice.

**Amen.**

### Hymn

StF 470

Lord, for the years your love has kept and guided,  
urged and inspired us, cheered us on our way,  
sought us and saved us, pardoned and provided:  
Lord of the years, we bring our thanks today.

Lord, for that word, the Word of Life which fires us,  
speaks to our hearts and sets our souls ablaze,  
teaches and trains, rebukes us and inspires us:  
Lord of the word, receive your people's praise.

Lord, for our land in this our generation,  
spirits oppressed by pleasure, wealth and care:  
for young and old, for commonwealth and nation,  
Lord of our land, be pleased to hear our prayer.

Lord, for our world when we disown and doubt him,  
loveless in strength, and comfortless in pain,  
hungry and helpless, lost indeed without him:  
Lord of the world, we pray that Christ may reign.

Lord for ourselves; in living power remake us -  
self on the cross and Christ upon the throne,  
past put behind us, for the future take us:  
Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

*words: Timothy Dudley-Smith (b. 1926)*

## Prayer

Gracious God, we are yours because you love us, and have called us to be your own.  
Even whilst we marvel at this great privilege,  
we are aware of the many ways in which we have failed  
to live up to all that you call us to be.

We confess that often we have failed you, and forgotten you.

I confess before God, in the company of all God's people,  
that my life, and the life of the world, are broken by sin.

***May God forgive you, Christ renew you,  
and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.***

***I confess before God,  
in the company of all God's people,  
that my life, and the life of the world,  
are broken by sin.***

May God forgive you, Christ renew you,  
and the Spirit enable you to grow in love.

***Thanks be to God.  
Amen.***

*Silence*

Lord, you are life:

***We praise you, for you give us life, and you keep us in life.***

Lord, you are light:

***We praise you, for you light up our lives.***

Lord, you are hope:

***We praise you, for you call us onward.***

Lord, when you walked the earth,  
you were not found in the palaces of kings or the chambers of government,  
but in the homes of ordinary people.

***We praise you, for you are constantly with us.***

Your nearness sanctifies our work and rest,  
our eating and drinking,  
our speech and our silence.

You transform the water of daily life into the wine of joy.

***We praise you, for our whole life is made holy by your touch.***

We meet you in our neighbours.

We receive your love from those who offer us affection and care.

We give your love to those to whom we show respect and love.

***May we recognise you in every person we meet,  
rich or poor, old or young.***

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

***Amen***

## Readings: Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-19

But now thus says the Lord,  
he who created you, O Jacob,  
he who formed you, O Israel:  
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;  
I have called you by name, you are mine.

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;  
and through the rivers - they shall not overwhelm you;  
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,  
and the flame shall not consume you.

For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.

Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old.  
I am about to do a new thing;  
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?  
I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

#### Mark 1:4-13

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, "You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

#### **Reflection**

The last year has been hard, and we are not certain what this new year will hold. We all hope that it will be better than the last one, but we're not sure how long we will have to wait to see any improvements.

So let us hold on to that promise of God, through Isaiah: he has redeemed us, and he calls us by name. We are God's, and God will not let us go. God will be with us and we will not be consumed by fire, washed away by the water, or any other disaster.

At the end of the reading, Isaiah tells us not to remember "the former things", but to look instead to the future, and the new things that will come. As we start this year, are we hoping that we can indeed forget, or at least leave behind, the year that's just ended?

I wonder what new thing God is going to do in the coming months.

When we are able to worship together again regularly in our buildings, and are permitted to gather for all the other activities we enjoyed before March 2020, I wonder if there are "former things" that should be left behind in order to make way for the new things God has for us?

As we prepare to renew our covenant with the God who will not forsake us, but loves us continually, take a moment to thank God for his love, and for bringing us safely through into this present time. This is a God we can rely on!

## Hymn

StF 156

From the breaking of the dawn,  
to the setting of the sun,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
Words of power, strong to save,  
that will never pass away;  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
For your covenant is sure,  
and on this I am secure:  
I can stand on every promise of your word.

When I stumble and I sin,  
condemnation pressing in,  
I will stand on every promise of your word.  
You are faithful to forgive,  
that in freedom I might live,  
so I stand on every promise of your word.  
Guilt to innocence restored;  
you remember sins no more.

So I'll stand on every promise of your word.  
When I'm faced with anguished choice  
I will listen for your voice,  
and I'll stand on every promise of your word.  
Through this dark and troubled land,  
you will guide me with your hand  
as I stand on every promise of your word.

And you've promised to complete  
every work begun in me,  
so I'll stand on every promise of your word.  
Hope that lifts me from despair;  
love that casts out every fear  
as I stand on every promise of your word.

Not forsaken, not alone,  
for the Comforter has come,  
and I stand on every promise of your word.  
Grace sufficient, grace for me,  
grace for all who will believe.  
We will stand on every promise of your word.

*words and music: Keith Getty (b. 1974) and Stuart Townend (b. 1963)*

## Prayer

God our Father, fountain of goodness, creator of all that is,  
you have made us in your own image.  
You have given us life and reason,  
love for one another, and a hunger for you.

In darkness you are our light,  
in adversity and temptation our strength.  
You bear patiently with us in our folly and sin,  
granting your law to guide us  
and your prophets to renew our faith.

When the time was right, you came to us in love and mercy  
in Jesus Christ, your living Word, full of grace and truth.  
He lived among us, declaring your forgiveness  
and revealing your wisdom  
in works of mercy and words of power.

For us he suffered and died on the Cross,  
by death destroying death.  
You raised him from the dead  
and exalted him to your right hand on high.

Through him you sent your Holy Spirit  
to be the life and light of your people,  
gathered together in every time and place  
to glorify your holy Name.

**Amen**

### **Introduction to the Covenant**

Brothers and sisters, we are aware of the grace of God,  
which sustains us and the world in which we live.

We have reflected on the challenge of Christian commitment.

Now we claim again for ourselves the covenant which God has made with his people,  
and take his yoke upon us.

To take his yoke upon us  
means that we are content that he appoint us our place and work,  
and that he himself is our reward.

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 please Christ and 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 anew to him,  
trusting in his promises and relying on his grace.

### **The Covenant Prayer**

Let us pray:

Lord, God, holy Father,

since you have called us through Christ to share in this gracious covenant,

we take upon ourselves with joy the yoke of obedience,

and for love of you, engage ourselves to seek and do your perfect will.

We are no longer our own, but yours.

*please say the following words aloud, and stand if you are able*

***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,  
you are mine and I am yours.  
So be it.  
And let the covenant now made on earth be ratified in heaven.  
Amen.**

*silence for reflection*

**Hymn**                      StF 564

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,  
'til death thy endless mercies seal,  
and make the sacrifice complete.

*words: Charles Wesley (1707-88)*

**Blessing & Dismissal**

This is God's world  
***and we will serve God in it.***

May God, who has given you the desire to serve him,  
grant you grace and courage to follow him always.

Go in peace, in the power of the Spirit,  
to live and work to God's praise and glory.

***Thanks be to God.  
Amen.***

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## Sermon

At this time of year, the readings in the lectionary take us back and forth in time. We heard about John the Baptist during Advent, how he proclaimed that the Messiah was at hand. We were taken back thirty years to see this Messiah being born - a baby born in poverty and obscurity - and now we are back with John the Baptist in the wilderness, hearing Mark's account of how John baptised Jesus.

The symbol of baptism takes us back to the beginning of time, when the universe was a watery chaos, and only God had the power to contain it, and make space for the earth to be created. The ancients believed that only God's power was holding the sea back, and they saw that the sea is not quiet within its limits, but tears at the shoreline, attempting to break through and destroy the world. And sometimes it wins small victories, when cliffs fall, and houses, roads, even whole villages, are consumed. Rivers, too, break their banks and destroy homes, cars ... everything in their path.

In baptism, Jesus willingly submits to these forces of chaos and destruction, in the faith that God's power will hold him safely. He won't be washed away, but will rise from the water made new.

And as he emerges from the water, the heavens are *torn* open as the Holy Spirit descends, and then he is *driven* into the wilderness - a place of solitude, hunger, and wild beasts.

Mark's account is rough and abrupt, and filled with hints of danger and violence. Jesus' life was under threat from his birth, and would continue to be so until he finally submitted to the forces of death.

Jesus walked a dangerous path. Occasionally we see him hesitate, and spend time in prayer before continuing his way. He wasn't oblivious to the danger, or immune to fear.

But he continued in the faith that God will not allow him to be overcome, or destroyed. Even when it appeared that chaos and destruction had won, he rose from death - the firstborn of those who follow.

When we make our Covenant, and renew our commitment, we don't know what the way ahead will look like. We don't know waves might come and sweep us off our feet, leaving us gasping for breath.

We do know that God's