



How do we keep going when we feel let down? Covenant in a time of pandemic

A service sheet to guide reflections in January 2021

Introduction We are taking time this month to review and renew our commitment to God. On the 20th January the Christchurch community held a covenant service over the internet. This service sheet follows much of that service ending with the Covenant prayer. Please know that you are joining friends at Christchurch as you follow these words. We begin with a song.

Hymn **Be still, for the presence of the Lord – *Singing the Faith* 20**

Please find Matt Beckingham's version of this with words here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDP9pfVNpdc>

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|---|---|
| 1 Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here ; come bow before him now with reverence and fear : in him no sin is found — we stand on holy ground. Be still, for the presence of the Lord, the Holy One, is here. | Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around. |
| 2 Be still, for the glory of the Lord is shining all around ; he burns with holy fire, with splendour he is crowned : how awesome is the sight — our radiant King of light ! | 3 Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place ; he comes to cleanse and heal, to minister his grace : no work too hard for him — in faith receive from him. Be still, for the power of the Lord is moving in this place. |

David J. Evans (b. 1957)

Scene-setting story Recently I have felt a bit of frustration with those who want to rush to proclaim that God is in control in the middle of this pandemic. While still recognising the greatness of God, the suffering being caused by the current pandemic makes me feel a whole range of emotions. Some of us may even be feeling let down, disappointed by how bad things have gotten. The ancient peoples of Israel often found themselves in that place. So I wondered if their Psalms might help us now to express our thoughts and feelings to God.

When planning this service I shared my thoughts with Wendy Walker (Wendy is a student minister who has made Christchurch her "link" church and is sharing in some of our activities). Wendy responded to me with the story of a student minister, Lyra*, who turned up at a conference having had her car badly smashed up. All Lyra's friends were very upset and angry about the terrible experience she had undergone. The bishop who was with them at the conference gathered a group of about eight students around Lyra in a ring of prayer. But he surprised everyone by starting off his prayer by saying "God what were you thinking of in letting Lyra go through this terrible ordeal of the car crash? You know we love her so much and we know that you love her. We feel very bad about this. Lyra is giving her life to serve you. We are angry with you. We could take our eyes off you but if we did then what a loss that would be" and he gradually and gently turned the prayer and the feeling around to one of comfort, and even trust in God, the God who gave so much to them. Wendy concluded that the bishop, through his prayer, was a psalmist.

From the Psalms we can see that a person, or a group, may go through a series of different phases in approaching God, especially when starting out by feeling let down. In this service we will look at how that works in one Psalm, number 13, in particular. We will also follow those phases or stages of that Psalm in the different parts of this service. The four stages in

mind are: lamenting; waiting; perceiving; responding. These phases can apply in our relationship with God but perhaps also in any relationship where we feel let down.

Psalm 13 To begin, we will look at the first half the Psalm which covers lamenting and waiting. With it we have interwoven our own words of lament and our own words of waiting:

The Psalmist' Voice

¹ How long, LORD?
Will you forget me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me? (NIV)

Voice 2 I've only seen my dad in a care home once in six months

Voice 3 The Intensive Care Units are full and over-stretched

Voice 1 Visits to my son in supported accommodation have been stopped

Voice 2 Each day we hear the COVID death toll

Voice 3 The restrictions just keep going on and on

Voice 2 Its hard not to feel a bit down - it's the same four walls

Voice 3 We are waiting, waiting for it to make any sense

The Psalmist' Voice

² How long must I wrestle with my thoughts
and day after day have sorrow in my heart?
How long will my enemy triumph over me? (NIV)

Comment So with the Psalmist we start with lament. You might wish to add in your own words of lament at this point. What sorrows would you bring to God?

After lamenting, the Psalmist reminds us to wait. Sometimes like Job in the Old Testament we cannot understand why suffering happens. Friends tell Job to be angry with God. Instead Job chooses to wait and in the end he glimpses more of the wonder of God's creative power.

Prayer The prayer we used at our Covenant service came from the Iona Community and was used in Iona Abbey on Tuesday night the 19th of January and combines lament and waiting. This prayer is based on Psalms 34 and 130. The prayer can be found on the Iona Community Facebook page. If you cannot find the prayer then perhaps spend a minute focussing on your breathing and remember that whatever is happening God is closer than our very breath. Maybe you might like to repeat the following verses as you wait in God's presence?

I wait eagerly for the LORD's help,
and in his word I trust.
⁶ I wait for the Lord
more eagerly than sentries wait for the dawn—
than sentries wait for the dawn. (GNB Psalm 130:5)

Song Yes I will (Mia Fieldes/Eddie Hoagland/Jonathan Smith) 2018

This song speaks of how we still sing even in the deepest valley and though "our hearts are heavy". Here is a recording:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NrTv39-IG4M>

From lamenting and waiting, in Psalm 13 the writer turns to perceiving and responding. We continue with verses from **Psalm 13 interwoven with contemporary voices.**

The Psalmist' Voice Look on me and answer, LORD my God.
Give light to my eyes, or I will sleep in death,
⁴ and my enemy will say, "I have overcome him,"
and my foes will rejoice when I fall. (NIV)

Voice 2: In the quiet beauty of the snow, I remembered God's gentle love that makes all things new

Voice 3: I'll never forget the smile on Dad's face when he heard that his turn to be immunised had come

Voice 2: When I could no longer see God's hand in our circumstances, I suddenly noticed his face in the smile of a tired key worker

The Psalmist' Voice

⁵ But I trust in your unfailing love;
my heart rejoices in your salvation.
⁶ I will sing the LORD's praise,
for he has been good to me. (NIV)

Voice 2: When Sunday came, our sofa became our pew. The sunlight streaming through the children's rainbow drawings became our stained glass window. We snuggled and we sang as familiar faces brought God's message through our screens.... and we knew that God is with us.

Voice 3: While I longed to share my love with relatives far away, I found new ways to show God's love to neighbours right next door

Voice 2: I'm learning to live my life in a way that is about trust instead of control, praise instead of panic, peace that passes understanding.

Comment The Psalmist has moved through lament and waiting, to desiring to perceive God, and asking for light. Then the Psalmist finally moves to responding with trust and song. For God turns up. Even when we break our promises, even when we mess up the world and hurt the people entrusted to us. God keeps turning up for us. Our Gospel reading too reminds us that we don't always perceive – but when we do it is wonderful! An epiphany.

Bible reading: Gospel Luke 24:28-35 The background to this passage is that it's the first Easter day and two followers of Jesus have left Jerusalem in confusion at the news that Jesus' body has disappeared. They are deep in despair and a stranger (Jesus) comes and walks with them and explains the Scriptures to them about why these things had to happen. Then ...

²⁸ As they came near the village to which they were going, Jesus acted as if he were going farther; ²⁹ but they held him back, saying, "Stay with us; the day is almost over and it is getting dark." So he went in to stay with them. ³⁰ He sat down to eat with them, took the bread, and said the blessing; then he broke the bread and gave it to them. ³¹ Then their eyes were opened and they recognized him, but he disappeared from their sight. ³² They said to each other, "Wasn't it like a fire burning in us when he talked to us on the road and explained the Scriptures to us?"

³³ They got up at once and went back to Jerusalem, where they found the eleven disciples gathered together with the others ³⁴ and saying, "The Lord is risen indeed! He has appeared to Simon!"

³⁵ The two then explained to them what had happened on the road, and how they had recognized the Lord when he broke the bread.

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Reflection This story is told as an event in the experience of the first disciples. It can also be read as an image of what occurs for the follower of Jesus in any time and place.

Those first disciples were in the deepest despair and confusion on that road out of Jerusalem to the village of Emmaus. In the middle of their feelings of confusion and being let down, God in Jesus turned up. But they did not recognise Jesus. He was strange to them. Yet he walked alongside them. He listened to them and talked to them. He opened the Scripture to them. And they invited him in and he ate with them. It was in that moment of sharing that their eyes were opened. They had an epiphany. They perceived that God had turned up.

For much of this terrible time of the virus we may feel in despair or confusion or doubt. Like those first disciples on their way out of Jerusalem we may feel badly let down. This passage might ask us to think about who has walked alongside us. It might invite us to try to remember any times when God has turned up. Now might be a moment to ask, as the Psalmist does, for light in our eyes to perceive God.

The disciples in Emmaus suddenly perceived that the stranger at the table with them was Jesus. They got up immediately and turned around going straight back to Jerusalem to share the good news. When they had listened to Jesus it was like "a fire burning" in them. They were fired up. God in Jesus had turned up for them and now they were turning back to God. Through the Old Testament times the people of Israel found that God was faithful to his promises, his covenant, to help them. In Jesus God offers a new covenant. God continues to keep turning up.

Question Where can we see God turning up even now?

My colleague Roger Smith who is the Methodist minister (presbyter) with oversight of Guiseley, (& other churches) has written a prayer to go with a banner made last summer to re-open Guiseley Methodist Church after the first lockdown. This prayer speaks of the many places that even now we can see God turning up. It is also a prayer for healing in our world.



Scientists work around-the-clock to develop effective vaccines:
for the healing of the nations.

Those in vulnerable groups so glad to be invited to have their job:
for the healing of the nations.

Care home residents and staff dare to hope for a better tomorrow:
for the healing of the nations.

Growing numbers of people are protected from serious illness:
for the healing of the nations.

People work tirelessly to counter false information:
for the healing of the nations.

Hard-pressed NHS staff see light at the end of a dark tunnel:
for the healing of the nations.

As local communities we understand the need for continuing restrictions:
for the healing of the nations.

As a rich nation we hear the challenge
to share the vaccine with poorer countries:
for the healing of the nations.

As church communities we must put
the needs of the weakest first:

for the healing of the nations.

And I ask God now
to help me play my part:
for the healing of the nations. Amen.

[Banner from Guiseley Methodist Church,
words by Roger Smith]

Having lamented and waited, and then perceived the turning up of God, we continue by responding. We will respond through our remaking of the Covenant promise. We prepare to do so with the song *All I once held dear* by Graham Kendrick which reminds us that there is no greater thing than knowing Jesus. "You're my all, you're the best, you're my joy my righteousness". The song also talks of what it is "to know the power of your risen life" – and connects us to those first disciples running back from the village after meeting Jesus. They were renewed and re-energised to share good news. So may we be too.

Hymn/Song All I once held dear (Graham Kendrick)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4r8XfE_VNb0

Prayer to renew our Covenant relationship with God

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. That 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..... (We say to God)

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.

The Lord's prayer

Hymn This, this is the God we adore – *Singing the Faith* 67

This short and timeless message as sung again by Matt Beckingham can be found here:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Oyi9bw9hQw&list=PLAs_mtl6dnlvkrpRbnWHdMAHaGdM_Sj6LkS&index

Sending song: *A little bit of love* by Graham Kendrick with virtual choir

A beautiful piece that speaks of how it may be a long way but with love we can get there together. I find this totally uplifting. We make the covenant prayer to God as individuals and it is as a community of faith that we help each other to fulfil our promises. Thankyou.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=auwgDr2BA7E>

8.30 Blessing As God has turned up for us, let us turn up for God. And may the blessing of God, Creator, Healer and Guide be with us today and always. Amen.

Service prepared by Roberta Topham and Wendy Walker drawing on material from *Singing the Faith CCLI 5560*, and from *The Methodist Worship Book* Used with permission. Covenant Prayer from [1991] © Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes. The Methodist Church in Britain'. With thanks to Rev Roger Smith for *The Healing of the Nations* prayer and photograph of the Guiseley banner.

*Lyra: We changed the name of the person in the story to protect her identity.