

Reflections and Prayers for the New Year

This is the 39th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

A very happy New Year to you all

But then, we said that a year ago: then what? The unexpected came upon us as never before.

Unexpected visitors

Nowadays, we rarely answer the front door to unexpected visitors: people don't just drop in as they did. In bygone days, it seemed to happen much more often and not just because, in my boyhood, I lived in a manse. When I was 14, some weeks after we moved to 12, King Edward Road, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, at about 8 pm one dark Sunday evening, a 'man of the road' called, asking for money: my parents weren't back from church and I answered the door. Hesitatingly, I declined his request and after a brief exchange he reluctantly went on his way, mumbling. I remember being anxious answering the door on dark evenings all that winter: would it be him again?

(Maybe this is why ministers' addresses tend not to be publicised on church noticeboards: but I'm aware that the episode begs all sorts of questions, not for addressing now.)



Some visitors are wholly unexpected, as the recent photo shows from a friend's back garden in Sevenoaks, Kent. He (the plumage suggests that the bird is a 'he') even stayed long enough to be snapped! Rarer birds are sometimes unexpected visitors to our gardens or nature reserves and ornithologists (aka twitchers) will travel for miles to stand motionless, silently and often in unobtrusive hides, squinting through their one-legged telescopes, to view them.

The last Reflection of 2020 led us to the Bethlehem stable, Mary, Joseph and new-born Jesus. It may have been peaceful for a short while until unexpected visitors began to arrive. First, bedraggled shepherds off the moors with samples of their flock, as gifts. Gifts? 'Well, you're very kind and you have given us what you have. I'm not quite sure what to do with the lambs right now but thank you all the same.' Two millennia later, it was still something woollen – the ubiquitous pair of socks: 'Dear Auntie Ethel, you're very kind sending me the socks, as last year; thank you very much. I'm sure I shall enjoy wearing them when my feet have grown enough.' I used to be told, 'it's the thought that counts', and I thought 'really, and how much thought did the socks take!'

Then, days later, more unexpected visitors turn up (Isaiah 60 and Psalm 72 probably weren't at the forefront of the holy family's mind at that moment); three sartorially elegant camel-riders bearing the most unusual gifts, symbolic rather than practical, but valuable nonetheless. What did the recipients make of them? Whatever happened to them? Did Mary ever tell Jesus about them? Any other questions?

In his ministry Jesus said that his mission was first to the Jews, then to the Gentiles – all the other nations: God's revelation of his son was first to local Jewish shepherds, then, celebrated at the feast of the Epiphany, to the whole world, represented by the visitors from distant lands. In the Methodist Church, while the lectionary for the first Sunday in January offers the Epiphany readings (those mentioned above from the Old Testament and Matthew 2) whether it is the actual feast day or not, it may also be the occasion of the annual Covenant Service – that very distinctive act of worship and dedication – to which we now turn, with my immense gratitude to Brian Beck.

John Bell, January 2021. With thanks to Michael Brignall from Sevenoaks for the photo, December 2020. Ethel wasn't my aunt's real name and I wasn't her nephew: she was a kind family friend.

Covenant Service

The annual Covenant Service is a treasured part of our Methodist heritage. It is often admired, and when the Anglican-Methodist Covenant was signed in 2003 part of it was used in the celebratory service. Curiously it appears to be a particularly British treasure. I do not know what happens in all traditions but the American-based United Methodist Book of Worship does not contain it. Why I wonder?

The service has a long history. As the preface to the service on p.281 of the Methodist Worship Book explains, the idea of renewing our covenant with God goes back to John Wesley, who took up the idea from the writings of two Puritans, Richard and Joseph Alleine nearly a century before. He read extracts to a gathering of Methodists in London in August 1755 and together they entered into covenant with God. It became an annual tradition.

But the form of the service has changed immensely. Originally it consisted of a long sermon-like exhortation of nine pages followed by four pages of prayer of penitence and commitment, with heavy emphasis on our sinfulness. I can remember in my youth service books with that version, though I don't think I ever shared in a service using it. Only in the late 1920s was a broader order of service introduced, with sections on adoration, thanksgiving, confession and the covenant, to be followed by Holy Communion. Our current service is based on it. It has undergone several revisions since then to become the one we use now. It is no longer a separate ceremony attended by those who choose to attend but a complete act of Sunday worship with its own specially worded communion thanksgiving. Of the words Wesley would have used little now remains except the more traditional language of the exhortation and prayer on pages 289-90 of the Worship Book.

More importantly the current version has changed our understanding of what the service is about. Originally the emphasis was heavily on what we must do in coming to Christ and submitting to him for salvation, with little mention of God's initiative in Christ reaching out to us. Our modern form reminds us, on p.285, of the Old Testament roots of the covenant. It is not simply a private deal between us and God. It is rooted in his initiative, begun long ago in creation, the call of Abraham and Moses, the creation of Israel as God's special people and the preaching of the prophets. We do not make the covenant, it is God's offering to us and we are invited to enter into it because he has pledged himself to be our God and Saviour. That was what was happening in Exodus 24:1-8 when the covenant was sealed with the Israelites whom God of his own initiative had rescued from slavery in Egypt. He claimed them for his own and they responded. God's pledge was renewed in Jesus whose blood shed on the cross is for us 'the blood of the covenant' (I Cor. 11:25, our earliest written record of his words, earlier than the gospels). So we do not 'make' the covenant, we 'enter into it'. God has made it and he invites us to accept.

The words of the service are demanding. I know Methodists who avoid Covenant Sunday because they say it is too severe. On the other hand, I remember a woman whose husband had just died and who found comfort and strength in the prayer she had so often said, 'Let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and wholeheartedly yield all things to your pleasure and disposal.' You can only say those words if you trust God.

Today our horizons are immeasurably wider than those of the first Methodists. For most people of the eighteenth century the world they knew was limited to a radius of twenty-five miles or so from their town or village. Today our world is truly global. Even if we do not travel to distant places we are aware of them through the media. The challenges to our discipleship and the avenues for serving Christ are much wider and more varied. Our neighbours are no longer just the people we meet in the street but the poor and dispossessed across the world. War when it occurs no longer affects only the fighting forces and those who live in the area of conflict. It can engulf us all. Our concerns and responsibilities extend to protecting the planet on which we depend. It is easy to feel that the horizons of our Covenant Service are too narrow, focusing entirely on 'me' and my little world. The intercessions on p.290 of the Worship Book briefly seek to redress the balance. But everything I do starts with me – my perspective, my preoccupations, my responses. If I am not right, how can I rightly respond to the world about me? The Covenant Service is not the whole Christian agenda but it addresses the heart of every one of us and commits us to that wider responsibility.

Revd Dr Brian Beck, November 2020. Brian is a former President of the Conference and served as its Secretary from 1984 to 1998: now retired, he lives in Cambridge. Due to current widespread restrictions, Covenant services may happen later in 2021, if at all, rather than in January. We didn't expect that either.

The unexpected

If ever a year brought the unexpected, it was 2020. It hardly needs rehearsing: everyone has experienced it in their own, contrasting ways, and most are just pleased to see it through despite being denied the normal things of life. Tragically, over 73,000 deaths have been attributed to the coronavirus in the UK, each one leaving a grieving family. Restrictions on what we may and may not do, where we may and may not go, who we may and may not meet have abounded, to the point where we sometimes have lost track. The NHS, care and health services have been overworked and overwhelmed: 'non-essential' businesses have been laid aside and shut down and their staff sent home (or 'furloughed' – it sounds better): some will never re-open.

Professional football matches have been played to empty stadiums, with some surprising results (e.g. Aston Villa 7 Liverpool 2: Villa didn't miss their home fans that day). Dido Harding, Patrick Vallance, Chris Whitty, Jonathan Van-Tam, Jenny Harries and Stephen Powis, hitherto anonymous backroom medics, have become regular performers and household names in TV briefings from 10 Downing Street. Entertainment venues have been closed indefinitely. As if to encapsulate the unexpected, as I write, the BBC correspondent reports from a deserted Princes Street in Edinburgh where normally 80,000 people would gather to celebrate Hogmanay. A lone piper will play on the ramparts of the city's castle. All, and more, most unexpected.



On March 15th, I led morning worship at one of the village churches in the North Cheshire Circuit: I've been there many times over the years and know the small number of faithful members of the congregation. We were careful not to get too close, as news of this strange flu-like illness had begun to emerge, but we sang hymns, without inhibition, and had a normal service. As he often did, Paul, a local member, read for us the gospel lesson for the day, from John 4, about Jesus' unexpected encounter with the Samaritan woman at the well. After the service, Paul and I speculated about what might happen in the coming weeks.....and we bade farewell, until the next time I'm planned there – preachers know how it is.

Then the even more unexpected. It may seem trivial, but I haven't sung in church since that March morning: the last hymn included the words 'O Jesus, ever with us stay; make all our moments calm and bright.' (StF 365, R&S 389) I have just scanned my 2020 diary (still a hard-copy little book) and realised how many more calm days there were: engagements, activities and holidays cancelled, planned preaching appointments until May erased, even the meetings – often much-maligned – might have seemed bright. But the unexpected leads to more of the unexpected too: Joan and I resolved to use the time we had been given by walking in our local area – as some earlier Reflections have mentioned: we've discovered much about local patterns of life through the seasons. As I transfer future dates into the 2021 diary, I'm aware how very few there are: already some have been crossed out, as this area has been moved into tier 4. Sometime soon, I will hopefully receive an invitation from the local surgery to attend for a vaccination: it will certainly go in the diary and it brings us to.....

The unexpected triumph of scientists in inventing effective vaccines to combat the virus: they have developed in a few months what would normally have taken years, and the pharmaceutical companies (themselves often maligned for profiteering from medicinal drugs) are producing millions of doses. Not just unexpected, but sensational.

The unexpected has brought good news, bad news and simply different patterns of life: most of us have experienced all three in the past nine months and adjusted to it in our own ways. Let's not beat about the bush: 2020 has not all been good, but we have experienced unexpected acts of kindness: it is now behind us. We can look forward, vaccinations permitting, to less of the unexpected in 2021 as the weeks unfold.

John Bell, January 2021. Paul, the lesson reader, also happens to be a micro-biologist, Professor in Medicine, international expert on public health and consultant in the present pandemic. Photo from the Newcastle Evening Chronicle of St James Park during a match in the lockdown.

Prayers for the New Year

Little did anyone imagine the significance of the covenant words many of us said at the start of 2020: it's probably just as well that we didn't know how events would turn out, the toll they would take and how long the pandemic would afflict and affect us.

As we anticipate a brighter 2021, may I invite you – from your own personal perspective at the start of the year – to reflect on the words that the Covenant Service gives us. Brian Beck has observed that there can be something demanding, even severe, about them, but, as the lady he mentions discovered, they may offer comfort and strength. Maybe, at this time, for us too.

'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. Amen.'



After a moment of silent reflection, the Collect for New Year.

Lord of history, to whom a thousand years are as a day:
renew us by your Holy Spirit, that, while we have life and breath,
we may serve you with courage and hope;
through the grace of your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen

John Bell, January 2021. The covenant words are from page 290 and the Collect from page 563 of the Methodist Worship Book. Photo of the cross by Joan Bell, August 2020: the cross was crafted by a carpenter in or near Leadgate, County Durham, in 1947: my father received it as an unexpected gift at the beginning of his ministry.

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Hymns are referenced as far as possible from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymnbook (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P or even the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book – MHB), and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.