

What is it about the Covenant Service on the first Sunday of the year that almost guarantees low attendance? We can explain it in terms of people being exhausted and needing a rest to get over the Christmas and New Year festivities but in reality we all know what is happening. Once a year Methodists are called to face the demands of a radical commitment to discipleship – offering a kind of blank cheque of our lives in service to Christ. It brings us all up short. It makes us take a good hard look at where we are on the Christian road. Sometimes it is easier and more honest to stay in bed that morning.

John Wesley never wanted to disguise the challenge of whole hearted discipleship. That was the reason why in 1755 he introduced this special service which has become such an important part of our Methodist tradition. He wanted to give the Methodist people the opportunity to renew their commitment or “covenant relationship” with God. Such was the interest that he had to borrow a church in east London large enough to accommodate the numbers who wanted to attend. This is what Wesley wrote in his journal about the event:

*"I mentioned to the congregation another means of increasing serious religion which had been frequently practiced by our forefathers, namely, the joining in a covenant to serve God with all our heart and with all our soul. I explained this for several mornings, and on Friday, many of us kept a fast to the Lord, beseeching him to give us wisdom and strength, to make a promise unto the Lord our God and keep it.*

*"On Monday...I explained once more the nature of such an engagement and the manner of doing it acceptably to God.*

*"At six in the evening we met for that purpose. After I had recited the tenor of the covenant proposed, all those who desired to give testimony of their entrance into this covenant stood up, to the number of about 1,800 persons. Such a night I scarce ever saw before. Surely the fruit of it shall remain forever."*

The wording of the covenant prayer was inspired by Joseph and Richard Alleine, two 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritans. Since then the words have been revised a number of times but the meaning has remained. We begin by reminding ourselves that

*"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 temporal 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 assuredly given us in Christ, who strengthens us."*

Then comes the prayer:

*"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 made on earth,  
let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."*

Over 250 years have passed since that first Methodist covenant service in Spitalfields in London. And John Wesley was right – the fruit of it is still with us. It guards us against the sort of easy entertainment consumer brand of Christianity which some churches seem to offer. It makes us square up to tasks that we find uncomfortable and would rather not undertake. It reminds us that Christian service is about far more than our personal satisfaction and fulfillment. It acknowledges that ultimately we belong, not to ourselves, but to Christ. It is a declaration that we have placed all our trust in Him and are at His disposal.

As a preacher and as a member of Lay Witness I've been privileged to visit quite a number of Methodist churches over the years. What strikes me is the way that, despite small numbers, somehow ordinary lay people always seem to emerge at the right time to carry out tasks and take on responsibility. They are Sunday school teachers, MWI presidents, youth club leaders, treasurers, cleaners, property stewards, local preachers, pastoral visitors – the list goes on and on. Without them our churches would close. They are the evidence of the covenant prayer in action. They are God's gift to His Church.

In the south choir aisle of Westminster Abbey there is a famous plaque bearing the profiles of John and Charles Wesley. Underneath are the words attributed to Charles "God buries his workmen but carries on His work". Those are wonderful words. They put things in perspective. They shift the focus from the worker to the work. As Christians we have the wonderful privilege of being allowed a share in the great work of the Kingdom for the time given to us here on earth. It's not about us – it's about Him and it's for Him.

"To serve God with all our heart and with all our soul" -that's what John Wesley had in mind in 1755 and that's still the mark which the Covenant Service sets for us as we go into 2014.