



The Good News Letter

COULSDON METHODIST CHURCH

www.coulsdonmethodistchurch.org

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From our minister

Dear Friends

It was a member of the congregation – last Sunday (24th November) – who captured the tension many of us feel at this time of year. She was asking if we would be singing Carols next week. I replied that we would not - because it would be Advent Sunday – and we would sing hymns suitable for that season.

I think it is important for the Church to keep the season of Advent - but it does leave me with a slight feeling of schizophrenia. That is because the “world” has declared it to be Christmas – and has done so since about the start of November. It was around then I nearly turned off a TV programme, because it was sponsored by someone selling seasonal (that is Christmas) goods. That “world” attitude is further emphasised by one channel screening Christmas films every day since mid-November. All of that is before you start looking at the adverts – unless you do what my mother does and either mute them or switch to another channel while they are on. It is increasingly difficult to keep Advent as a season of waiting, preparing and hoping – but I for one believe it is important to do so.

I think it is right to think about the “second coming” or however else we see “the end” (but not quite as much as our Worship Book wants us to!) It is important to consider all those who played an important part in the first coming of Jesus – from the prophets with their looking forward and hoping for a Messiah, to John the Baptist preparing the way, and to Mary (and this year Joseph as well) who had to be prepared to say Yes to God.

I am glad that Coulsdon does not have its Carol service until the Sunday evening before Christmas (unlike most churches in the Circuit). That allows space to work through the season of Advent in a timely manner. I am glad too that the Church has decided to undertake an Advent study series – again emphasising that this is not yet Christmas. I hope that we shall all make something of the season of Advent. Then we shall be able fully to celebrate Christmas and God coming among us in Jesus.

A blessed Advent and a joyful Christmas to you all,

Stephen

Attention all Waitrose shoppers!

You will be pleased to know that the Floating Shelter has once again secured a green token box in Waitrose, Coulsdon, during December. When you are shopping in Waitrose please make sure you are given a green token and put it in the right box.

Carol singing in the Whitgift Centre

On Saturday 14 December the Coulsdon churches have a singing slot from 2pm to 3pm to raise funds for the Floating Shelter. Just turn up and join in the singing in the central atrium of the Whitgift Centre. No special singing skill required!

What is distinctive about Methodism?

(The fifth in a series of short articles, reproduced from the website of the Methodist Church)

5. A covenant with God

Methodists hold an annual Covenant Service, at which we celebrate all that God has done for us, and affirm that we give our lives and choices to God. Most churches hold the service in the New Year, but some hold them in September, at the beginning of the Methodist year.

The traditional Covenant prayer makes it very clear that this affirmation is a serious one that embraces the whole of our life, in all its parts. Most people find it quite tough to say, and really mean it. But the prayer is so central to the Christian life that other Churches have also adopted it.

In our culture we tend to prize our ability to make decisions and choose our own path in life. It can feel very hard to give that up. But this prayer is like a love poem. It is about surrendering to God in love and joy.

The Methodist Covenant 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 now made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven.

The Covenant Service

The covenant service is at the heart of Methodists' devotion and discipleship, and their dedication in working for social justice. In the service the Church joyfully celebrates God's gracious offer to Israel that "I will be their God and they shall be my people".

This offer is then extended beyond Israel to all women and men in Jesus Christ, who also provides the supreme example of what it is to live in such a relationship with God.

That relationship primarily involves the corporate life of the community of God's people (i.e. Israel; the Body of Christ). It is concerned with individuals within that group.

What God offers is a loving relationship. The Covenant is not a contract in which God and human beings agree to provide particular goods and services for each other! It is not something that we have to do to create a relationship with God. God has freely and graciously already made it possible.

Rather, the Covenant is the means of grace by which we accept the relationship and then seek to sustain it. It is therefore not so much about getting in to a relationship with God as it is about staying in it. It is not about acquiring a relationship with God, but living within the loving relationship that God has already offered us.

God's gracious offer to us is therefore simultaneously a challenge. If God is committed to us, are we prepared to accept that as reality and commit ourselves in return to God? Even if we do choose to accept it, how can we manage to live out our commitment adequately, frail and human as we are?

The New Testament suggests that as we join the group of those seeking to follow the way of Jesus, we respond to God's challenge with him and begin to share his relationship with God as Father. Within the group of disciples, this leads to his Spirit bubbling up in us as individuals, encouraging and enabling us to live out our side of the relationship (i.e. "writing God's ways on our hearts" as Jeremiah 31 describes the Covenant).

Origins of the Covenant Service

This idea of Covenant was basic to John Wesley's understanding of Christian discipleship. He saw the relationship with God in Covenant as being like a marriage between human beings (both as a community and as individuals) on the one side and God in Christ on the other (cf. Ephesians 5.21-33).

His original Covenant Prayer involved taking Christ as "my Head and Husband, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, for all times and conditions, to love, honour and obey thee before all others, and this to the death".

Wesley recognised that people needed not just to accept but also to grow in relationship with God. He therefore emphasised that God's grace and love constantly prompts and seeks to transform us, and so we should continually seek and pray to grow in holiness and love.

Over a number of years Wesley gradually saw the need for some regular ceremony which would enable people to open themselves to God more fully. He looked for some means of helping them to hear God's offer and challenge ever more deeply, and to allow God to prompt and enable them to respond. In 1755 Wesley created a form of service adapted from the works of Joseph and Richard Alleine. These works came from the Puritan tradition of pastoral and spiritual guidance. Wesley therefore insisted that the Covenant Service be located in a framework of pastoral care, preaching and guidance.

This framework dealt with the corporate needs of a particular society of Christian disciples, and within that with the needs of individuals within that group. It therefore linked personal devotion with corporate worship.

There would be a series of meetings about the Covenant involving sermons, explanations and exhortations. An invitation would then be issued for "those as will" to come to the Covenant Service. After a day's "Retreat" for people to prepare themselves in prayer, fasting, reflection and self-examination there would be the Covenant Service itself. This would be held in the context of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper. Wesley thought that this Sacrament brought into the realm of experience and made real all that was said in the Covenant. He therefore urged Methodists to pay it the highest regard, to put it at the centre of their spiritual life and to share in it frequently.

The process did not end with the Covenant Service. People were encouraged to continue to work out the implications for their lives of the fact that their relationship with God had been renewed in and through Christ. It was accepted that people might find this difficult to do without help, and might "backslide". There would therefore be further pastoral guidance offered to both groups and individuals in the weeks that followed the service.

Our Covenant service will be on Sunday 5 January.

Advent study course

An Advent study course is running over the four weeks of Advent on the dates in the diary below.

Church diary

Sun 1 Dec.	10am	Holy Communion (Rev. Stephen Mares)
Tue 3 Dec.	2.30pm	Advent study course (<i>see above</i>)
Thu 5 Dec.	10.30am	Open church (Prayers at 11.45)
	1.30pm	Table tennis (<i>in church hall</i>)
Sat 8 Dec.	10.45am	Carol singing at Coulsdon Library (CTC)
Sun 8 Dec.	8.45am	Bible study breakfast (<i>Colossians</i>)

	10am	Morning worship (Doreen Wright)
Tue 10 Dec.	2.30pm	Advent study course (<i>see above</i>)
Thu 12 Dec.	10.30am	Open church (Prayers at 11.45)
	1.30pm	Table tennis (<i>in church hall</i>)
Sat 14 Dec.	9.30am	Decorating the church for Christmas
Sun 15 Dec.	10am	Gift service (Rev. Stephen Mares)
Mon 16 Dec.	11am	Craft Club (<i>Christmas plate lunch show & tell</i>)
Tue 17 Dec.	2.30pm	Advent study course (<i>see above</i>)
Thu 19 Dec.	10.30am	Open church (Prayers at 11.45)
	1.30pm	Table tennis (<i>in church hall</i>)
Sun 22 Dec.	10am	Morning worship (<i>own arrangements</i>)
	5pm	Christmas tea
	6.30pm	Carol service (Rev. Stephen Mares)
Tue 24 Dec.	11.30pm	Holy Communion (Rev. Stephen Mares)
Wed 25 Dec	10am	Christmas Day (<i>at Whitethorn Avenue</i>)
Sun 29 Dec.	10am	Morning worship (Brian Brooks)
Thu 2 Jan.	10.30am	Open church (Prayers at 11.45)
Sun 5 Jan.	10am	Covenant service (Rev. Stephen Mares)