



Keeping in Touch Wesley Place Methodist Church, Alsager

Dear Friends,

There were very few of us at the Covenant Service on 9th January, and as with every other service over Christmas, we understood why. We are feeling some anxiety over rates of Covid and staying home and staying safe. We included in our worship in the building the intentions and prayers of those of you who stayed at home, I hope you felt it.

My sermon for Covenant Sunday was created as a gift to God's people at Wesley Place, and several who were present said it should be made available to those who weren't there. So I'm typing it up for the Message.

Unusually for me the theme began to take shape many weeks before the service. By mid December I had scribbled on a note on my desk:

I just want to gather everyone round a large cup of hot chocolate and hug everyone

I want everyone to feel loved, welcome, and included.

I want us always to be ready to let new folks in, and in fact for us to work hard at it.

I want all of us to be transformed by the love of God

So that we heal each other not hurt each other.

And grow!

In some ways, that's it really, sermon over! But of course I can't resist the temptation to say a bit more. Unusually, I chose some of the covenant service set readings, and another one that I felt fitted the theme - I just wanted to give a big cuddle from the pulpit to include everyone.

There's a Welsh word that sums it up better than any English word can - Cwtch. If you've got any Welsh connections you'll know it sums up that need for a family cuddle, a hug by the fireside, a 'there that makes everyone feel better' snuggling up together. If covid means we can't actually physically hug much, the image is there! (It's also the word for a little cubby hole where you put things - it's the same image of closeness and intimacy).

Into our group church cuddle, I want to say three things, they'll come in order over the next three weeks.

Firstly we have a glorious past, but like many Methodist churches we're losing it, and we must let it go. I spent some time after my compassionate leave catching up on the 150 year history I'd missed during my time off. I recognised the Methodism of the late twentieth century that I grew up in: strong social groups within the church, several old characters who held responsible office and gave devoted



service over many years, good traditional worship with involvement from young and old alike, organ and choir, and sustaining habits and ways of working that kept going without much change, but for many years worked.

Jesus spoke to the pharisees in Luke 13: 31-35; we often read the gospels and hear Jesus giving the pharisees a hard time, he seems to criticise them a lot. In Luke's gospel he's kinder to them than in the other gospels, and in these few verses seems to be asking them to let go of a past they have valued and devoted themselves to keeping going. The change Jesus is bringing will mean they must lose a lot of what they value and discover something more, that builds on their past, but develops it. He longs to gather the people of Jerusalem into a big hug - like a mother hen gathers her chicks under her wing. This is Good's desire to gather, cuddle, and love his people.

The Lament over Jerusalem

31 At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, "Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you." 32 He said to them, "Go and tell that fox for me,[a] 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. 33 Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed outside of Jerusalem.' 34 Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! 35 See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when[b] you say, 'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'"

Luke 13: 31-35

One of the things I discovered was a part of Wesley Place's DNA is friendship - we think of ourselves as a friendly church. When I said that from the pulpit on 9th January, there were some who shook their heads. What is recognised is that we've been a church where people come to meet their friends, but that dynamic can lead to a clique-ness that is only friendly to the insiders, it can appear closed and exclusive to new folks who come in, and that feeling can last a long time. I suggest we need to look again at our DNA and decide to be a friendly church - that lets go of this friendship group approach - and becomes open and welcoming to all. It's building on our past, developing one of our strengths, but making a new future for ourselves. Some of us love the old hymn 'What a friend we have in Jesus' because of it speaks of the intimacy and 'cuddle inclusive' nature of our relationship with God in Jesus.

As we pray the covenant prayer of availability and willingness to be used by God in whatever way he chooses, are we prepared to let go of some of the traits of our past and re-focus on an inclusive welcoming, friendly to all approach?

Next week, part two - we live in a hopeful present.

Your minister and friend,

Godbless,

Rob.

What a Friend We Have in Jesus

1. What a friend we have in Jesus
All our sins and griefs to bear
What a privilege to carry
Everything to God in prayer

3. Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged
Take it to the Lord in prayer

2. Oh, what peace we often forfeit
Oh, what needless pain we bear
All because we do not carry
Everything to God in prayer

4. Can we find a friend so faithful
Who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness
Take it to the Lord in prayer

Sunday	Time	Worship
16th January	Youtube service	Led by Ms Gifty Asamoah
23rd January	10.30 am on site	Led by Mr Daniel Keen
30th January	10.30 am on site	Local Arrangement
6th February	10.30 am on site	Holy Communion Led by Rev Rob Hilton

Father I Place Into Your Hands

Father, I place into Your hands,
The things I cannot do.
Father, I place into Your hands
The times that I've been through.
Father, I place into Your hands
The way that I should go,
For I know I always can trust You.

Father, I place into Your hands
My friends and family.
Father, I place into Your hands
The things that trouble me.
Father, I place into Your hands
The person I would be,
For I know I always can trust You.

Father, we love to see Your face,
We love to hear Your voice.
Father, we love to sing Your praise
And in Your name rejoice.
Father, we love to walk with You
And in Your presence rest,
For we know we always can trust You.

Father, I want to be with You
And do the things You do.
Father, I want to speak the words
That You are speaking too.
Father, I want to love the ones
That You will draw to You,
For I know that I am one with You

Sing or pray along
<https://youtu.be/zBfRNrvvUfc>

Life-giving God, in whose presence there is an abundance of hope and a plenitude of grace, grant that we may build communities of hospitality where bread is shared, forgiveness offered and justice proclaimed. And so, as our life together is shaped by your love, give us the grace to welcome all our companions to the feast of your kingdom, that there may be joy everlasting in heaven. Amen.

**Julian Pursehouse,
East Anglia District
Chair**

Jesus, guest and host,
**may our tables be safe
spaces where
everyone feels at
home.**

Jesus, friend and
brother,
**help us to practise the
hospitality we teach.**

Jesus, who washed the
feet of the disciples,
**teach us afresh the
sacrament of service.**

Jesus, generous giver,
**show us the abundance
of love where we see
only scarcity.**

Jesus, in whose name is found salvation, **help us rejoice in the kingdom banquet prepared for all.**

Jesus, you prayed that we might be one, just as you and the Father are one, **we pray for the unity of your Church, of all communities, of all creation and of all things in you. Amen.**

**Richard Andrew,
Darlington District
Chair**