

When the Taoiseac, Leo Varadkar, welcomed Pope Francis at Dublin Castle in August 2018, he told the Pope it was time to build 'a more mature relationship' between Church and State: 'a new covenant for the 21st century' – one in which 'religion is no longer at the centre of our society, but in which it still has an important place.'

Gladys Ganiel, sociologist of religion

relationship with God. Wesley saw covenant as being like a marriage of God and his people. Just as a marriage relationship needs to grow and develop, so discipleship is not just accepting God's grace but growing in God's grace.

In any meaningful personal relationship commitment is needed. To be married means a number of changes. We often talk about this in terms of 'compromises' and make jokes about keeping the toilet seat up or down, just how floral house decoration can get, or whether joint TV viewing can feature both *The Crown* and *Marvel Agents of Shield*! But there is something far deeper. It is the vulnerability of discovering your weaknesses in ways you never imagined, for instance: going through financial difficulties

In Essentials Unity, In Non-Essentials Liberty, In All Things Charity.

*Rupertus Meldenius,
German theologian*

or coping with grief. If someone loves you unconditionally then you respond in love, rather than in shame or guilt.

Wesley saw the need for some regular ceremony which would enable people to be reminded of this and to respond publicly. His covenant service itself centred on the Lord's Supper, followed by a covenant prayer. It is a difficult prayer for many to say, but is so real to the experience of discipleship that many churches have adopted it.

*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. And the
covenant now made on earth, let it
be ratified in heaven. Amen.¹*

This has some challenging lines for us to ask in prayer. Some Christians even feel unable to say it because they don't think that they can truly mean and fulfil it. To be prepared to be empty, or nothing, to be laid

¹Methodist Worship Book, page 290. © 1999 Trustees for Methodist Church Purposes

Paul discovered that ... (against our instincts) any good things that happen to us are not because of our virtue, but because of God's unconditional love; there is absolutely nothing we can do to make God love us, nor to stop God from loving us. And the name for this mystery is grace.

Rev'd Nicholas King SJ

low or laid aside involves a level of trust and obedience which is tough. It's very different from the kind of invitation into Christian discipleship which goes, 'Come to Jesus and all will be well – all your problems will be solved and God wants you to be healthy and wealthy.' At one point in John's gospel (John 6.60-68) some of those who followed him objected that his words about discipleship were a 'hard teaching' and many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him. Jesus then asked the twelve if they also wished to go away and Simon Peter replied, 'Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'

God calls us to the way of the cross only because he went there first. This covenant prayer is simply a response to what God has already offered us in love, forgiveness and the help of the Holy Spirit. We do not say it to try and earn God's acceptance. We say it in response to God's acceptance of us.

In 1931, at the end of a mission at Oxford University, the then Archbishop of Canterbury, William

Temple, introduced the hymn *When I survey the wondrous cross*. Just before the last verse, he stopped the singing and asked people to reflect on this verse:

*Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all.*

Temple then invited the congregation to join in with the words of this verse, saying: 'If you mean them with all your heart, sing them as loud as you can. If you don't mean them at all, keep silent. If you mean them even a little, and want to mean them more, sing them very softly.'

Prayer and Covenant

Renewing our covenant with God is helpful in exploring prayer, because it takes us to the heart of who God is. His promises and actions of love come first, and all that we do is in response to that. Part of prayer is to consciously remember who God is and what he has done. Here, there is a great deal of help in praying with others. We can pray privately in our own room or home, silently on the bus, or while in the supermarket -

To me, prayer is really for putting things in perspective and finding greater values. You think there's something you want, but when you pray, you realise that there is something much more important than that.

Timothy West, actor