

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 3rd May 2015 10am

Call to worship

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;

Everyone who loves is born of God, and knows God.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God;

1 John 4: 7, 16

Collect

Eternal God,

Whose son Jesus Christ

Is the way, the truth and the life;

Grant us to walk in his way,

To rejoice in his truth,

And to share his risen life;

Who is alive and reigns with you,

In the unity of the Holy Spirit,

One God, now and for ever.

Amen.

John 15.1-8

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.

²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Sermon

Watching crowds cheered on Thursday as a 15-year old boy was pulled out of the rubble in Kathmandu.

Pemba Tamang had kept himself alive for five days by eating jars of ghee and drinking the water dripping from his rain-soaked clothes.

On the other side of the world, at least one middle-aged woman replied to a text that day from Unicef and donated £5 to the aid effort.

Over £14 million has been given to the Disasters Emergency committee appeal by the British public.

Ione Wells, a student who was attacked on her way home in Camden, wrote an article about the experience for her university Newspaper.

On the radio, on Wednesday this week, she said she had waived her right to anonymity in order to connect with other victims.

To show them that they are not alone.

It was the beginning of an outpouring of support on Facebook and Twitter.

What is it that connects us?

We live in a world that is deeply disconnected.

Last week, coming to work on the tube as usual, I noticed a new ad at Bond Street station.

A lithe, slender, tanned woman in a yellow bikini.

Are you beach body ready?

As so often, the picture made me acutely aware of my own, rather overweight, middle-aged flesh.

Very much not beach body ready!

In a society where there is an ideal of beauty, all those of us who don't fit feel left out.

Unsatisfactory.

Disconnected.

This is a society in which those who are able to work and pay tax are set against those who are dependent on benefits.

Those who were fortunate enough to buy a house a generation ago, before prices rocketed, are set against those who can't even afford the deposit on a rented flat in London.

Those who had the good luck to be born in Western Europe are set against the desperate refugees from North Africa who risk a perilous sea crossing from Libya in the hope of a better life.

On Thursday we will be voting for our next government.

Divisive politics have been built into the campaigning, the TV debates, the election posters.

Why should we vote for any particular party?

This is a plan for a better future - for you, for your family.

This is a plan to reward hard work, share prosperity and build a better Britain.

You would be hard put to tell which came from the front page of the Conservative Manifesto, and which from the Labour one!

Both appeal to me – to my family – to my desire to do well.

At the London District Synod last Saturday, Rachel Lampard from the Joint Public Issues Team flagged up the four ‘invisible’ issues of this election campaign.

- Climate change
- Rents rising at twice the rate of incomes
- Benefit sanctions
- The West’s responsibility for the conditions in Iraq and Syria which are driving refugees to cross the Mediterranean

You won’t hear politicians talking about these issues, she said.

Because they all affect the poor disproportionately.

And if we are going to do something about them, those of us who have more than our fair share – of habitable land, of housing, of income, of safety – might have to give something up.

That’s not a vote winner.

So these issues are mostly hidden.

The politicians focus on the things we will want to vote for.

Because they will increase our prosperity.

Because they will make our lives better.

Yet I began today with two stories about unlikely connection.

Somehow, despite the politicians’ appeals to our self-interest, there is something at a deeper level that unites us as a human family.

That makes it impossible for us to focus entirely on what works for me, at the expense of others.

We can’t help but weep at the pictures from Nepal.

And want to help.

We can’t help but identify with a victim who invites other victims to walk tall together, and refuse to be intimidated.

And interestingly, even that beach body ad in London tube stations has united a community of people who won’t accept that sort of body fascism.

They have deface the posters, petitioned TfL and the ASA, and the ad is coming down.

In today's gospel reading, Jesus is talking to his disciples.
It is the night before his death.
He needs them to know what is important, before they are left on their own.
And what is important is connection.
He knows what it is to be deeply connected with God.
His disciples have been learning over three years of travelling ministry, what it is to be deeply connected to him.
And now they will need to embody that connection in their mutual relationship with each other.
And take it out to share in a word that is longing for connection.
The image Jesus uses is a vine.
Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the vine represents Israel.
Sometimes an Israel which is fruitful and holy and in touch with their Lord.
Sometimes an Israel which is selfish and careless and deliberately not listening to the commandments.
Fruit is what shows whether the vine is flourishing.
Whether its roots are deep in the tradition.
Whether it is paying attention to what is needed for a community to thrive.

And of course it is ridiculous to think of a healthy vine where one branch has luscious bunches of grapes, and another is empty and dead.
Either the whole vine flourishes, or it does not.
A vine teaches us about interdependence.
Mutuality.
Relationship.

So that's the image I have in my head as I prepare to cast my vote on Thursday.
Last year's Theos report on the voting habits of Christians indicated that there is no 'Christian' party.
There was a slight tendency for Anglicans to vote Conservative, and for Catholics to vote Labour, and for nonconformists like us to have a wide range of voting tendencies!

But today's reading gives us the questions to ask.
What is it that connects us?
All of us?
Which policies will promote that interconnectedness, rather than divide us further?
What pruning of my lifestyle am I prepared to accept, so that the whole vine might flourish?

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.