

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 6th September 2015 11am

Proverbs 22: 1-2, 8-9, 22-23

James 2: 1-10, 14-17

Mark 7: 24-37

When death comes
like the hungry bear in autumn;
when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;
when death comes
like the measles-pox:

when death comes
like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering
what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything
as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,
and I look upon time as no more than an idea,
and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common
as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,
tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something
precious to the earth.

When it's over, I want to say: all my life
I was a bride married to amazement.
I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it's over, I don't want to wonder
if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
I don't want to find myself sighing and frightened,
or full of argument.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.

... ..

I love Mary Oliver's poem.
I love her willingness to name the things we fear.
I love her openness to the particular beauties of the world.
I love her attitude.

I don't want to end up simply having visited this world.
Like her, I want to engage with it.
With everything.
With everybody.
Even if I get into trouble.
Even if it hurts.

I think Jesus would have loved this poem too.
He would have understood.
He said to his followers that he had come to bring life in all its fullness.
Emmanuel, God with us, was not just visiting this world.
God made of his life something particular, and real.

Today's reading from Mark's gospel is a fascinating one.

I wonder why Mark included the story?

Jesus doesn't come out of it very well.

He's made to look narrow-minded.

A bit insular.

A bit David Cameron.

No, we're full up.

My mission is to my own people.

No room for Syrians begging for favours.

I simply don't have time – space – energy for all your demands.

Go away.

Those of us who wept this week over the picture of the three-year old Syrian boy, Aylan Kurdi, drowned, face down in the surf at the edge of a Turkish beach – we will have a tiny glimpse of what this woman was going through.

Her child was at risk.

She would do anything – risk humiliation, embarrassment, rejection – to try to save her daughter.

Across two thousand years, the fate of two Syrian children stops us in our tracks and makes us think.

What are we about?

What is our mission?

What are we for?

Who matters?

Today is the first Sunday in the Connexional Year.

It is also the first Sunday in September.

Back in the Spring, Church Council designated September as the month for us to review our giving to the church.

We need a sermon about this, someone said.

We hardly ever preach about money.

‘Oh I’d like to do that,’ I blithely said.

So here I am.

But we decided that reviewing our giving in September wasn’t just about money.

It was about reviewing everything.

How we engage with this church.

How do we live out our faith in this place?

Not just – how much do we give?

But – what do we get involved in?

How do we offer our time and our energy and our skills to this place?

Are there things that need doing that I could do?

There is a leaflet to help you all with this review.

You should have been given one as you came in to church this morning.

It lists some of the tasks that have to be done to keep Hinde Street alive.

It invites you to think about what you already do.

About what new thing you might offer to help with.

And about what you might need to put down, in order to free up time and energy for the important things.

Which brings us back to the questions at the heart of Mark’s story.

What are we about?

What is our mission?

What are we for?

Who matters?

Because any sermon about money, or about time and talents, needs to begin here.

Why should we give money to Hinde Street?

Why should we give up our precious time and our limited energy to be a door steward, or to help at

Wednesday Club, or to operate the PA system?

Let’s go back to Mark.

There are many ways to interpret what happens here.

There is no single right answer.

Perhaps it is an opportunity for Jesus to demonstrate to his disciples their limited ability to engage with the world beyond Israel.

They don't matter.

They are just dogs.

They are just 'swarms' of migrants.

We don't use the refugee word.

Language protects our comfortable assumptions, and distances their need.

As Jesus voices the prejudice which they – and he – grew up with, they are forced to hear their own racist views uncomfortably reflected in their teacher.

They are taught a lesson.

Perhaps it is about economic power imbalances.

In the region around Tyre and Sidon, Jewish peasant farmers produced the food that was sold in the cities.

The cities were inhabited by wealthy gentiles.

In times of famine, the city-dwelling Syrians did OK.

The impoverished Jewish labourers starved.

So this was a foreign madam with a sense of entitlement, thinking she could barge in and demand a healing for her spoiled daughter.

No wonder Jesus, always on the side of the underdog, called her a rich bitch.

No wonder he staked a claim for the poor, the insecure, the voiceless in society.

She was taught a lesson.

Perhaps it is about the importance of focus.

Perhaps Jesus, like all the best management gurus, knows that a successful campaign must have small, measurable, achievable, time-limited goals.

SMART targets.

So it is sensible to define his objectives clearly.

This place but not that place.

These people, but not those.

If I try to do everything, nothing will be done well.

I have to learn to say no.

We are being taught a lesson.

These three explanations sound believable.

But somehow I am not entirely convinced.

I think the story tells the truth.

The simple truth.

I think it is the pivot of Mark's whole gospel.

I think at the start Jesus shared the assumptions and prejudices of a man of his time.

I think he assumed that the people of Israel were more important to God than the people of Syria.

I think he assumed men were more important than women.

And this feisty woman was not prepared to accept the norms of their society.

She answered him back.

She made him think twice.
She made him recognise the limitations of his mission.
She widened his scope.

This is not the only gospel story where the actions of a woman inspire the son of God.
Think of Mary washing Jesus' feet and drying them with her hair.
Think of how Jesus took that gesture, washed his disciples' feet, and turned it into a powerful visual aid for the topsy-turvy intimacy of God's love.
And here, at the heart of Mark's gospel, a woman who will not allow prejudice and narrow-mindedness to go unchallenged, broadens the scope of Jesus' mission to include everyone.

So, yes, economic imbalance should be exposed and denounced
And we do need to re-think our work/life balance in order to prioritise.
But these things are not the heart of the kingdom.
The heart of the kingdom is God's including love.
Yes, you are accepted.
And you.
And you.
God is not stingy.
There is enough to go round.

So Jesus does not end up simply having visited this place – this Gentile territory.
He does not just pop over for a quiet retreat from the crowds back home.
He gets involved.
He has that occasional and uncomfortable experience – he has his mind changed.
His life will never be the same again.

No wonder his next miracle is healing a deaf man who has an impediment in his speech.
The Syro-Phoenician woman heard what he said clearly.
And he heard her reply.
They communicated.
The world changed.

The disciples, the people of Israel, the Scribes and Pharisees from the religious establishment – like the deaf man, they need to have their ears opened.
They need to be able to speak clearly.
They need to open the channels of communication across all the barriers of race and class and gender.

At the beginning of this new Connexional year, at the start of this month of reviewing our commitment to this church, we need to remind ourselves why we need money...
Why we need a property committee...
Why we need a tea and coffee rota...

What are we about?
What is our mission?
What are we for?
Who matters?

I have some answers, I think, after four years in this place.
We are about welcoming the people who come here looking for something.
We are about listening.
We are about including.
We do not want to be like James's church, attending to the well-dressed, and paying no attention to the person in dirty clothes.

So we exist because 69 anonymous groups feel at home here.
Because lonely and hurting people sit in our glass entrance room day after day, and write their prayers, and find a place of quiet and peace.
Because people who are homeless, or who feel homeless, find a welcoming space downstairs every Wednesday afternoon.
Because during the coldest months of the year, we offer a meal and a bed for the night to fifteen people who would otherwise be sleeping on the streets.

But there's more than that.
Jesus had something to offer the Syro-Phoenician woman: he could heal her daughter.
But she had something to offer him too.
She had something to teach him.

The rule of Benedict makes hospitality an essential part of monastic life.
Not because doing a good deed earns us brownie points.
But because by welcoming the stranger, the outsider, the other, we might learn something.
Our minds and hearts might be stretched.

John Wesley, in his sermon on visiting the sick, encouraged the early Methodists to go pastoral visiting.
Not because you need a Methodist at your bedside if you're poorly.
But because the one who visits needs to see the humanity in the other person.
As we did in that toddler on the beach.

I don't think Hinde Street makes the mistake of James's church.
We're unlikely to say '*go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill*' to a naked, hungry brother or sister.
We will send them to the West London Day Centre.
We will invite them to Wednesday Club.
We will take them to Tesco and buy them a sandwich.

But will we learn from them?
Will we allow them to offer us their wisdom.

Will we open our ears to what they have to say?

Will we allow our lives, our mission, our assumptions to be challenged and changed?

This church exists because we know we would be lesser people if we did not try to do something to help those who are less fortunate than us.

But also – and perhaps more importantly – because we know we would be lesser people if we were not part of something bigger, stranger, odder, more gloriously eccentric and various than our own circle of like-minded friends.

Because we might encounter God here, when we least expect it.

So if we don't want to end up simply having visited this church – if we want to belong here – I encourage you to think about what you can give.

What you can do.

There are plenty of opportunities.

But think too about why we do what we do.

What are we for?

And think about who we want to be ourselves.

Giving money.

Getting involved.

These should not be onerous duties.

That is not what James means when he says that *faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead*.

If our church is about creating a community where everyone might feel they belong, where everyone might find life in all its fullness, that means you too.

That means me.

Remember Mary Oliver:

We look on everyone as a brotherhood and a sisterhood.

Each life is a flower, as common as a field daisy, and as singular.

Each name is a comfortable music in the mouth.

And each body a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth.

We all matter.

Gentile women as well as the people of Israel.

Those with a comfortable lifestyle, as well as those who struggle to find enough to eat.

Those with too much time on their hands, as well as those with too little.

Those who will be voting for Jeremy Corbyn, and those who are not even members of the Labour party.

The rich and the poor have this in common: the Lord is the maker of them all.

We all belong.

So I invite you to choose something to do that will help you feel you belong.

And that will encourage others to feel they belong too.

This church needs to invite us all into life in all its fullness.
Take the risk of widening your scope.
Do something new.
Go somewhere different.
Meet someone completely unlike you.
Give something.
And learn something too.

Be prepared to change, and to grow.

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if I have made of my life something particular, and real.
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