

**Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> December 2015 10am

Rev Val Reid

***Call to worship***

By the tender mercy of our God  
the dawn from on high will break upon us  
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.

*Luke 1: 78-79*

***Collect***

God of all holiness  
your promises stand unshaken through all generations  
and you lift up all who are burdened and brought low;  
Renew our hope in you,  
as we wait for the coming in glory of Jesus Christ,  
our Judge and our Saviour,  
who is alive and reigns with you  
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,  
One God, world without end.  
Amen.

***Luke 3: 1-6***

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene,

<sup>2</sup>during the high-priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas,  
the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness.

<sup>3</sup>He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, <sup>4</sup>as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight.

<sup>5</sup> Every valley shall be filled,  
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,  
and the crooked shall be made straight,

and the rough ways made smooth;  
<sup>6</sup> and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” ’

## **Sermon**

All day on Wednesday Parliament debated whether or not to bomb Isis.

Within a few hours of the vote in favour, RAF planes were dropping bombs on oil fields in Syria.

Did opposing the bombing make you a terrorist-sympathiser?

Did supporting it make you a war-monger?

Whichever side of the debate we found ourselves on, we are all now committed to what Cabinet Ministers say will probably be a long war on terror.

Committed to more death, more anger, more retaliation, more refugees.

On Wednesday evening in San Bernadino in California, a young couple left their baby with his grandparents, and shot and killed 14 people at a Health Department Christmas party.

"Our prayers are with the victims, their families, and the first responders in San Bernardino who willingly go into harm's way to save others," wrote Ted Cruz, Republican presidential candidate.

But his prayers turned into a political row, centred on the failure of the Republican-dominated Congress to pass laws proposed by Barak Obama to restrict gun ownership.

"Your "thoughts" should be about steps to take to stop this carnage. Your "prayers" should be for forgiveness if you do nothing - again," tweeted Senator Chris Murphy, a Democrat.

The American press have dubbed this 'prayer-shaming.'

Meanwhile, a hundred yards away, the lights of Oxford Street are twinkling for Christmas, and shoppers are crowding the pavements.

Churches up and down the country are preparing for toy services, nativity services, candlelight carol services; preparing to celebrate the birth of the prince of peace.

Are we about to be prayer-shamed?

We have reached the second Sunday of Advent.

I think perhaps Advent is my favourite season of the liturgical year.

It is a season which reminds us, again, what it means to live in the gap between the reality of this heart-breaking world, and our hope in God.

Somehow we have to find a place where these two truths can co-exist.

How?

Today's reading from Luke chapter 3 introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist.

Luke introduces John very carefully.

He begins by setting John in his chronological, political and cultural context.

The fifteenth year of the reign of the Emperor Tiberius.

Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea.

Herod was ruler of Galilee.

Annas and Caiaphas were the high priests in Jerusalem.

The Romans are very firmly in charge of this middle-eastern outpost of Empire.

Their puppet King is on the throne.

Their governor is in place to quell political dissent and unrest.

The religious authorities are colluding with those in power to maintain the status quo.

Into this political and social reality, *the word of God came to John, son of Zechariah, in the wilderness.*

These are the words which echo over and over again in the Hebrew Scriptures, as the people who least expect it, are called to pay attention to what God might have to say.

And to speak truth to others who don't really want to hear it.

Jeremiah, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Hosea – 'the word of the Lord' came to each of them, in their own time, in their own context, in the days of whichever political regime they inhabited.

And it always came in a particular place.

In the temple.

Among the exiles by the River Chebar.

In Anathoth in the land of Benjamin.

Biblical scholars have spent ages poring over the names and the dates in Luke's gospel, trying to work out from the names exactly when John the Baptist started his ministry.

The year 28 CE, probably, they think.

But that seems to me to miss the point.

The point is this.

In the middle of the complicated and oppressive politics of Roman rule in this place, at this time, one particular person makes space to pay attention to a very different set of values.

John is in the wilderness when the word of God comes to him.

It is likely that he spent time with the desert sect of the Essenes.

They certainly had an initiation ceremony involving washing in water, which John made his own.

But the important thing is that John made space to look beyond the politics and the social conditions of his time.

He found a space – for him the wilderness of Jordan – to recognise that Tiberius, Herod, Pilate, Caiaphas – they were not the whole truth.

John inhabited a bigger world even than the vast Roman Empire.

He was living in God's time.

Because the message that he heard was that God is coming.

Valleys will be filled.

Mountains and hills will be made low.

The crooked shall be made straight.

The rough ways shall be made smooth.

And all flesh shall see the salvation of God.

This is the message of Luke's gospel.

The gospel we shall follow and reflect on and learn from throughout this new liturgical year.  
Luke wants us to know that in the middle of the mess and hurt and struggle of the world, God is always working for the salvation of all flesh.  
Not just the Jews, his chosen people.  
But all flesh.

And the messengers are not the politicians, the rulers, the archbishops, the people with power: the messengers, as they always have been, are the ordinary people who find a space in which God's message of hope can be heard.

So John lives in the gap between how things are.  
And how he believes things will be one day.

God's redemptive work is not yet finished.  
Way back in the ancestor stories, Moses asks God for a name.  
Who shall I say has called me to liberate the people?  
'*I am who I am*' says God.

The Hebrew language only has two tenses.  
Things which have been completed.  
And things which have not been completed yet.  
This is the tense that God uses.

So God's name could be *I am who I am*.  
Or *I am who I was*.  
Or *I am what I will be*.

God is a story that is still being told.

From Moses, to the Hebrew prophets, to John the Baptist, to Hinde Street.  
God is still in the process of working out salvation.  
For all flesh.

So as we look around at shootings and bombings and the never-ending war on terror and the endless debate about the edges of the Welfare State, where can we find a space to listen to that quiet voice?  
Where can we make a space to notice that God is still working?  
Where can we create a place to articulate this hope?  
Where can we find the energy to live in this uncomfortable gap between what we see in our newspapers and our streets, and what we believe are the kingdom values we are called to live by?

On Friday morning I met with my Professional Practice Supervisor in Hammersmith.  
As well as this Methodist minister, she also supervises professionals who work with disturbed children.  
The first children or Syrian refugees are trickling through into London schools, she told me.  
And this week she worked with a group of teachers in a local primary school.

One of them had a little girl from Syria in her class.

A little girl so traumatised by war, and by her escape from the war zone, that all her hair has fallen out.

She has to wear a little beany hat to cover her bald head.

All the children in her class have befriended her.

They all take turns to sit with her at break time.

They all want to play with her.

They all want to make her feel better.

They all love her.

Somewhere deep in our DNA, before our world damages it too much, is the desire to befriend and to heal.

God is working in an ordinary London primary school.

And someone had noticed.

This is what Advent is about.

Making space.

Learning to wait.

Learning to look out for signs that God is still around, still active, still working for good.

Learning to pay attention to the word that will come, if we will stop weeping, or worrying, or shopping for a moment.

If we find our own space.

If we listen.

Amen.