

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 17 January 2021 11.00am

Rev Dr R F Leao-Neto

Readings: 1 Samuel 3:1-10; 1 Corinthians 6:12-20; John 1:43-51

Theme: Telling the Old Story of the Gospel, afresh, and anew!

Title: Jesus call: Will you come and follow me?

Introduction: What does it mean?

There is a furious debate going on about what is truth and what is true. There is no way we ourselves can escape being part of it. The outcome of this debate is still unknown. The world is polarised. It feels as if we are on a journey into the unknown. The outcome still all open! Will truth prevail? Even truth needs to be interpreted so that it becomes a true truth. An example of this being the Pandemic, where had we been told the truth perhaps this second wave would not have been as high as it is.

To be a follower of Christ is to enter that debate head-on. A war of interpretation and narratives. A battle of stories. To be a follower of Jesus is to tell the Gospel Story anew. Will you come and follow me? Jesus asks. The war of interpretation, of narrative implies questions such as: what does the Gospel mean in our present context? What does it mean for me? For those close to me? What does it mean for the church now and post pandemic? What does it mean for our Local church and communities facing all this challenge? And for the Methodist Connexion as it votes in the Summer on the report 'God in Love Unites us'?

So as you can see I am rather exercised by the situation in which we find ourselves at this period in the world and the church, and consequently in my own life and of those who are close to me. It is all an open game.

The readings for today, about the calling of Jesus for us to follow him, are posing the same question: what does it all mean?

I'd like to take it in turn: called to be today's Nathaniels: who is Jesus? Called to be today's Samuels: God against injustice; called to be today's St Pauls: what is immoral is the lack of love.

Today's Nathaniels: who is Jesus?

Nathanael asks: But! Can anything good come from Nazareth? "Come and See! Come and see for yourself!". Nathanael soon came to the conclusion that 'Yes' out of a desperate place like Nazareth, a great Teacher had come: Rabbi! (Wisdom has the knack to always come from surprising places). From that backwater came someone who was even more than a teacher: the Divine Saviour, in the hellenistic way of saying it: The Son of God (coming not from the Pantheon but from within the ordinary people); and in the semitic/tribal way of saying it: The King of Israel! (in other words: The Messiah - ironically not with an army but on the back of a Donkey).

How did Nathanael get here? I think because Jesus showed him love, grace and acceptance, 'here is a true Israelite. Nothing about him is false.' The text is too short to explain it fully, but one can imagine the impact that Jesus would have had in his life, what we call the redemption, salvation, the changes that love and grace bring, the healing that deep acceptance operates. Perhaps a similar experience to that of the blind man (of whom we know more) later in the Gospel of John chapter 9, whose explanation about Jesus was simple: 'I don't know if he is Christ or a sinner. I know one thing: I was blind, but now I see' (9.25). Similarly, Nathanael was able to interpret his personal experience with Jesus in a way that led him to claim the throne of Israel for the one from the backwater, and the cosmic title of Son of God for the despised teacher. What do we have to show and tell the world from our experience with Jesus? 'Jesus the First and the Last, in thee my soul is cast!' - about Jesus for Today?

Let us be like Nathanael. Let us allow this story of love and deep acceptance to inspire us to do the same, to look at Jesus and his Gospel and say what it means for us and our world today. This involves interpretation and narrative. And here we are in the sphere of the spirit: the power of imagination, the force of the creative word, perhaps the courage of a daring act of love. This is a very disputed territory. But without our individual contribution, the Old Story of the Gospel will not be told afresh and anew. You and I, are the Nathaniels of today. To be a Follower of Christ is to dare to say: what Christ and his Gospel mean today!

Today's Samuels: God against injustice

Samuel, little kneeling golden locks, angel-like-looking Samuel had a job! Inspired by the Spirit to tell anew the Word of God. And it was not pleasant because that word was against the priestly family of Eli. It brought judgement and death in its path. Eli, the old priest, told Samuel: 'little boy, listen carefully and tell me what you hear! Don't hide anything from me!' Though the word was against Eli's own family, Eli opened a space for Samuel's hearing to be taken on board. Not a small moment in the life of the one who would become a great prophet and Judge in Israel. And a lesson for all to learn that there must be scope, room for difference in hearing, interpreting, presenting the word of God anew. The word was a reaction against the greed of Eli's sons who robbed the people through the sacred offering in the temple (1 Samuel 2,12ff). Justice, equity and fairness suffered. God would avenge. Samuel said.

What do we hear? What do we tell? This is a very disputed territory. Let me tell you a few stories about interpretations and narratives.

This story happens long ago in the 1950s. The Congregation at the Methodist Theological College in São Paulo thought there was potential and suggested my Dad to stay longer, another two years beyond his BTh, and do his Masters to become an academic himself. My Dad stayed, and wrote a thesis arguing that there were signs in the OT that the identity of Israel was not dependent on the promised land. Not least because the Law was received in the Desert. The organisation of the people into groups of leaders was done in the Desert, this under the influence of a Priest of a different people and religion, Jethro, Moses father-in-law (Exodus 18). There was clearly a people, a law, an organisation, a culture, a religion, a relationship with God before the possession of the land, before the entry into Canaan.

As you can imagine, this was a controversial subject, in particular coming soon after the Holocaust and the passing of the 1947 UN resolution 181 calling for the partition of Palestine into Arab and Jewish states and Jerusalem as a *corpus separatum*, and soon after the 1948 creation of the State of Israel led by Ben Gurion, considered a Catastrophe, Al-Nakba, for the Palestinians. My Dad's subtle points about fairness to all were too much for Professor Balden, his supervisor, a missionary from the deep South of the US. Rev Balden could not give space for such thinking. My Dad burnt his precious thesis in the fire in the kitchen of the Theological College. His dreams vanished as a consequence. But not his calling. He had to take another tortuous route into the ministry. It took ten years before his ordination.

A Rabbi friend of mine, came to our door on Christmas Day bringing mince pies and Christmas cake, he agrees with my father's thesis. He looks at the tragic and glorious stories of his people and says that it is more to do with a journey into the unknown, rather than a fixed promise of a piece of land. The flight from Egypt and the Desert as a calling to a journey into the unknown. He himself lived in Israel/Palestine when he worked as a photo journalist but felt that he had to move out as he could not cope anymore with the suffering of the Palestinian people that his work as a photographer brought into focus for him. This is of course controversial, for example, another Jewish good friend of mine, with whom I worked very closely in leading the community in Harlesden and Brent, made a point of giving me a book that expresses the opposite views, entitled: 'My promised Land!'

With all gentleness and compassion, we ought to be Samuels, those who hear the old word of God and proclaim it anew and afresh today in word and deeds. And we all have to try and be like Eli, the old priest, who was able to make room for fresh hearing of that word. So that justice, equity and fairness may have a chance.

Today's St. Paul: the lack of love is immoral.

As Lord Soper put it: it is a fellowship of controversy. What do you hear? How do you report it? Where do you stand? How do you see the Church in this context? And even more importantly, how do you see you in it? Do you find yourself under a fig tree like Nathanael, or like Samuel, in the middle of the night hearing voices in your head, or like St Paul, do you find yourself concerned about what matters in moral standards? St Paul was concerned about sexual immorality. He balanced his concerns with saying: all belong to God, the body, the food, and both will be destroyed. He is against prostitution because love cannot be bought. What is immoral is lack of love, lack of God.

Shall the Methodist Church allow weddings between people of the same sex, to occur in the Methodist Churches across the Connexion? The report 'God in Love Unites us' is much more than just that question. It

is about the Church trying to identify where there is love, and where it identifies it, it is trying to say, because there is love here, therefore there is God. Is there love in a young relationship of co-habitation? If so, there is God. Is there love in an old relationship where sex does not play a role anymore? If so, there is God. Is there love in a new relationship for a divorced person? If so, God is there. Is there love in a relationship of people of the same sex? If so, God is there too.

Though some people may want to argue that the report would imply a change in our doctrines, I would say that it is not a change of doctrine it is a change in our interpretation, it is a response for our time to the perennial question where is God? God is where love is! And that is our doctrine. If the Report is adopted, there will be a change in the wording of the service for a marriage, between a man and a woman to between two people, even though, what would have been changed is the interpretation of our doctrine and not the doctrine in itself. It will have been interpreted for today.

The Spirit calls you and me!

I don't know how people find being a Christian boring or uninteresting. I find it the opposite. I find Christianity to be an open game, it is an old story still being interpreted and re-interpreted for today. It is very disputed which makes it exciting too. To follow Jesus is to be alive to God and to our time! Let's be Nathaniels, Samuels, Pauls as we follow Jesus in the world today, with deep acceptance of the other, with room for difference, and with great love. Amen.

Rev Dr R F Leão-Neto