

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 27th January 2019 10am

Revd Val Reid

Luke 4: 14-21

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,

to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.’

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, ‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’

Sermon

Alex Salmond – Scottish nationalist hero, or serial abuser?

Robert Thompson and Jon Venables – evil child-killers or confused and damaged children?

These people have been in the news this week, and yet again we are faced with our temptation to polarised judgements.

How seductive it is to demonise the other.

In my monthly peer supervision group, I found myself offering a word of wisdom from my teenage enthusiasm for Lord of the Rings.

One of my colleagues emailed me afterwards, challenging Tolkein’s world view.

The way he invented orcs as evil, as irredeemable, so we could hate them and watch them being slaughtered with impunity.

He had a point.

It made me think of the two-minute hate in Orwell’s 1984.

The horrible thing about the Two Minutes Hate was not that one was obliged to act a part, but that it was impossible to avoid joining in.

Within thirty seconds any pretence was always unnecessary.

A hideous ecstasy of fear and vindictiveness, a desire to kill, to torture, to smash faces in with a sledge hammer, seemed to flow through the whole group of people like an electric current, turning one even against one's will into a grimacing, screaming lunatic.

And yet the rage that one felt was an abstract, undirected emotion which could be switched from one object to another like the flame of a blowlamp.

Big Brother knew the value of permission to hate.

It is a force for social cohesion.

Sociologists talk about two kinds of social network – bonding capital and bridging capital.

Bonding capital is created within homogenous groups or tribes.

It creates identity.

It brings people together by emphasising their likeness.

By labelling those who don't belong as outsiders

As enemies.

If you read through the Hebrew Scriptures – our Old Testament – it contains story after story about bonding capital.

Stories about how Yahweh loves and makes a covenant with this people.

The people of Israel.

Stories about defeating and killing the enemies – Philistines, Ammonites, Canaanites – it doesn't really matter which tribe.

God is on our side.

And it contains rules designed to create bonding capital.

What you eat.

What you wear.

Who you marry.

These are signs of insiders.

People who belong.

So when Jesus begins his preaching ministry in Galilee, he is initially seen as a good thing.

He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

He goes to worship in his home synagogue.

He reads from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah.

The prophet who united the people of Israel during their long exile in Babylon.

A popular choice.

he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Who wouldn't approve of that manifesto?

All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth.

But then things change.

Jesus reminds the congregation that they are not the only ones whom God loves.

He reminds them that Elijah was sent to a widow in Sidon during the famine.

That Elisha cured a leper in Syria, not in Israel.

When they heard this, all in the synagogue were filled with rage.

They drive him out of the town, try to throw him over a cliff.

They don't want to hear this.

Unlike bonding capital, bridging capital brings different groups together.

Reminds us that our tribal identities are not the end of the story.

That we have more in common than that which divides us.

That quote - more in common – was made famous by Jo Cox, the MP who was murdered outside her constituency office by a far-right sympathiser who shouted 'Put Britain first' as he stabbed her.

Just a few weeks before the EU referendum in 2016.

Jesus' ministry was all about bridging capital.

What does the love of God for all people look like, when it is embodied in a single human life?

It looks like someone who is willing to cross boundaries, talk to foreigners, share meals with political collaborators, allow women to sit at his feet and learn like disciples.

It seriously upsets those for whom the status quo represents security, identity, control.

On Holocaust Memorial Sunday, it is good to remember these things.

Because the story of Jesus first being welcomed, and then being rejected, by his own people, his own tribe, has become part of the story of anti-semitism.

Groups for whom bonding capital was important chose to direct their two-minute hate towards a particular people.

Towards the Jews.

And it ended with six million deaths.

On 27th January every year we remember the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, the largest Nazi death camp.

This year we are also invited to remember the genocides which took place in Cambodia, Rwanda, Bosnia and Darfur.

In our own country, we can hardly fail to remember the tribalism that still separates remainers and leavers, and has paralysed parliament for so long.

So what is the answer?

What creates bridging capital in a divided community?

What nudges us outside our tribal identities, our suspiciously easy hatreds, in a world where we can see – today of all days – where such divisions might lead?

I was reading this week about a project in Barking and Dagenham.

One of the most deprived boroughs in London.

Shockingly high levels of unemployment, homelessness, teenage pregnancy, domestic violence and early death.

8% of the population moves out every year – and new waves of people move in.

Until 2010, the main stronghold of the British National Party.

After the 2010 local elections, when none of the BNP councillors were re-elected, the Participatory City Foundation approached newly elected Labour Councillors with a plan for the borough.

They wanted to invest in building bridging capital.

To bring a divided community together.

To re-write the politics of hate.

In November 2017 they launched 'Every One, Every Day'.

They opened two shops on high streets in Barking and Dagenham.

The shops didn't sell anything – they were spaces where local people could meet and talk and plan and share ideas and launch local projects.

Instead of white, middle-class men – the sort of people who usually populate such spaces – in Barking and Dagenham 90% of the participants were women.

They set up their own crèches in the shops, so they could take it in turns to look after the children while others talked and planned.

Out of these community talking shops have come welcoming committees for new residents, community potluck meals, cooking sessions, street lunches.

There's a group turning patches of wasteland into community gardens.

There's a bee school and a chicken school.

Knitting sessions and sewing lessons.

A place for freelance workers to meet and collaborate.

Computer workshops.

Storytelling for kids.

A community choir.

A scheme for shutting roads to traffic so children can play together after school.

All the different tribes of Barking and Dagenham have got to know each other.

Discovered a shared passion for bees or football.

Kids play together in safe streets, rather than join gangs.

It's just the beginning.

4,000 residents have taken part so far, out of a borough of 200,000.

But it's the beginning of a new story.

A story of bridging the gaps and the divisions and the fears that keep people apart.

The gaps and the divisions and the fears that lead to protest votes and gang violence and concentration camps.

Surely our calling as Christians is to be people who create bridging capital.

Who provide places where anyone and everyone can worship God, regardless of their age or gender or colour or sexual orientation.

Who provide places like the Winter Night Shelter where those with homes and those without sit down and share the same food and the same meal-time chat.

Holocaust Memorial Sunday is an occasion to make us stop and think.

To challenge us not to get sucked into our modern-day version of the two-minute hate.

Whoever it is this week.

And to ask ourselves what we are going to do – as a church and as individuals – to bridge the gaps, so that we can say – and mean – never again?

Amen.