

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 3rd February 2019 11am

Revd Val Reid

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

1 Corinthians 13: 1-13

Luke 4: 21-30

This is a sermon about hypocrisy.
Not calling down judgement on all you hypocrites out there.
That's far too easy.
This is a sermon in praise of hypocrisy.

Let me tell you what I mean.

The book of Jeremiah begins with 'Jeremiah's call and commission.'
That's how the NRSV headlines this morning's lectionary.
God begins with this wonderful affirmation.

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you
And before you were born I consecrated you;
I appointed you a prophet to the nations.*

But Jeremiah is reluctant.
Don't ask me to do this.
I'm only a boy.

Reluctance to take on the prophetic role is common in the Hebrew Scriptures.
Think of Moses claiming that he's not a very eloquent speaker.
Or Amos reminding his critics that he's only a herdsman, a dresser of sycamore trees.
Or Jonah running as far as he can in the opposite direction from Nineveh.

Why don't prophets want to be prophets?

Well, it's a big ask.

Jeremiah discovers this to his cost.

At a time of political upheaval, of constantly shifting alliances between kings, he feels called to remind those in power in Judah of the word of the Lord.

To remind Josiah and Jehoiakim and Zedekiah that chopping and changing their allegiance between Assyria and Egypt and Babylon, looking all the time for the greatest advantage for themselves, is not the best way. Is not God's way.

There are plenty of other prophets to say what the King wants to hear.

But Jeremiah always, inconveniently, irritatingly, brings the people back to the word of the Lord, to the need to put God first, to the demands of the law for justice in the land.
Being a prophet makes you seriously unpopular.

But there's another reason why it's tough to be a prophet.
You have to practice what you preach.
Or find yourself a hypocrite.
Jeremiah practices what he preaches – and suffers for it.
Despite the constant temptation to say the comfortable thing to those in power.
But it's a tough assignment.

Let's look for a moment at our gospel reading this morning.
Jesus is beginning his ministry.
He is invited to read in his home synagogue in Nazareth.
He reads from the prophet Isaiah.
About good news to the poor.
Release to the captives.
Sight to the blind.
People are delighted.
Full of praise.
Amazed at his gracious words.
But then he goes on to unpack this message.
He reminds them that this is not just about a personal God who is on the side of the covenant people.
This is a God with a bigger agenda.
Back in the days of Elijah, he tells them, in the days of the famine, Elijah was sent not to one of the many widows in Israel.
But to a widow in Zarephath in Sidon.
And there were many lepers in Israel.
But Elisha cured Naaman, the Syrian. The foreigner.
It's this reminder of God's inclusiveness that angers the people.
That's why they try to throw him over a cliff.

Mark tells this story slightly differently.
He tells us that Jesus taught in the synagogue in Nazareth.
But in this gospel he doesn't expound the history of the wideness of God's mercy.
Instead he acts it out in his own ministry.
In the next chapter he encounters the Syro-Phoenician woman who begs him to heal her daughter.
He refuses, on the grounds that his mission is to the people of Israel.
And she calls him out on his too-narrow interpretation of God's mercy.
Immediately after his conversation with her, he heads for Sidon.
He heals a deaf man.
In the very place where Elijah was sent to the widow during the famine.

If we are going to preach inclusiveness, then we have to practice inclusiveness.

Or we will be called out on our hypocrisy.
As Jesus was, by a feisty and desperate woman.

So where does that leave us?
Do we avoid our prophetic role because it's too hard?
Because we don't want to suffer as Jeremiah did?
Or because, if we are a bit easier on ourselves, we don't want to be exposed as hypocrites?

Let's take an example.
Let's pause to reflect on one of the things we are called to speak prophetically about.

In his Soper Sermon last Sunday, our Chair of District, Nigel, challenged us about the unequal distribution of wealth in our Country.
A topic that was dear to Donald Soper's heart.
As a church and as individuals, we should be speaking up and speaking out.

But – hang on a moment – what would it look like if we took our own words seriously?

There's been a bit of a Facebook storm this week about a Prada plain white T shirt that costs £270.
How can that possibly be justified?
Primark sells an identical white T shirt for just £2.
But hold on.
How come Primark can sell them so cheap?
How much are they paying the people who make these T shirts?

And what about the white 'I wanna be a Spice Girl' T shirts sold for £19.40 to raise money for Comic Relief's Gender Justice campaign?
Made in a factory in Bangladesh where women are forced to work 16 hours a day for 35p an hour.

So where do we buy our T shirts?]
How much do we pay for them?
And how many do we have?
Enough?
More than enough?
Would the money better be spent on the transformation of Seymour Place?
Do we check out where they are made, and the conditions of the workers who make them?
Every time?

It's a complicated business, being prophetic about the unequal distribution of wealth.
Because it calls into question our own practice.
So perhaps we are tempted to keep quiet.
Not to risk speaking into the public square.
In case we look foolish.
In case our hypocrisy is exposed.

But I want to speak in praise of hypocrisy.

Not because it is the tribute vice pays to virtue, as La Rochefoucauld cynically suggested.

But because taking the risk of being a hypocrite means that we have at least engaged with some of the serious issues which should challenge us as people of faith, people with a commitment to ethical practice.

At last Sunday's Holocaust Memorial Service at the West London Synagogue, we were invited to remember the White Rose Group.

This small group of students and their professor at Munich University began an anonymous leaflet and graffiti campaign against the Nazi regime in 1942.

They were betrayed by the university handyman, put on trial, and executed by the Gestapo just nine months later.

Brother and sister Hans and Sophie Scholl were beheaded by guillotine.

Hans called out *Es lebe die Freiheit!* – Long live freedom! – as the blade descended.

If I had been a student in 1942, would I have joined them?

Probably not.

If I'm honest.

And the temptation is, therefore, to do nothing.

Because I can't be that brave, that courageous, I keep my head below the parapet.

Because I'm not Martin Luther King, I keep quiet about racial inequality.

Because I'm not Mahatma Ghandi, I don't engage in non-violent protest.

Because I'm not Saint Mother Teresa, I don't even try to get involved with the problems we see all around us on the streets of London.

What could I do?

It would be less than a drop in the ocean.

And if I preach about it, or write about it, without actually doing something significant about it, I'd feel like a hypocrite.

Social comparison theory explains how we make ourselves miserable through upward comparison.

It's about the relentless pressure of capitalism.

We always want more than we have.

Because someone else has it.

Or we have seen it on TV.

But I wonder whether it also applies, in an odd sort of way, to living a good life.

To putting our faith into practice.

We contrast the selves we are with the selves we might be if we were perfect Christians.

And we are ashamed.

What hypocrites we are.

So we make ourselves small.

We are tempted not to do the small good things we could do, or say the small good things we could say, because we are not perfect.

Perhaps we should compare downwards, not upwards.

What would the world be like if I did this one small thing?

Not instead of solving the problem of inequality.

But instead of doing nothing.

A book I've been reading this week gave me a slightly offbeat parable for this.

Chaos theory.

Back in 1961 Edward Lorenz was a meteorologist researching weather patterns.

He had a very large, very slow computer called the Royal McBee, that was the size of this church.

He was trying to map all the variables that affect weather patterns, so he could predict storms more accurately.

He came up with twelve mathematical equations to define the relationship between temperature and barometric pressure and wind speed and all the other things that affect weather patterns.

He put them into the computer, and set it off.

You can imagine the piles and piles of printouts that were generated.

But the weather patterns the computer predicted never repeated themselves.

The same variables produced very different results.

One day he took a shortcut.

In order to look in more detail at one small sequence, he typed part of the equation straight into the computer from an earlier printout.

He went off to get a cup of coffee.

He came back and found a completely different weather pattern.

There was no point of resemblance in any way with the previous prediction.

When he looked more closely, he saw that one of the numbers he was working with was .506127

To save space, the printout had rounded it down to .506

He thought the difference between the two numbers was inconsequential.

.000127

But that tiny number – a puff of air no more than the beat of a butterfly's wing – turned out to be the difference between a blue sky and a monsoon.

This was the beginning of the science of chaos.

Tiny, tiny things can make a huge difference.

This week I've been on a clergy conference at St George's House.

Twenty-three Anglican priests and one Methodist minister got together to reflect on how we nurture growth.

In ourselves.

And in the church.

One of the things that someone said really made me think.

How many thousands of people did Jesus walk past during his ministry?

How many lepers?

How many deaf people?

How many people with sick children?

There were only a few that he was able to stop and heal.

So how did he choose the few?

Was it random? Was it part of a plan? Was it the outworking of chaos theory?

But he did it.

He didn't decide not to heal anyone because he couldn't heal everyone.

Those few encounters – those few conversations – those few healings – were the beat of a butterfly's wing two thousand years ago.

And here we are, two thousand years later, worshipping this morning in Hinde Street, called to be the body of Christ in this world.

Called to speak out in prophecy.

And to do what we can.

It won't be enough.

We may feel hypocritical – because we could do so much more.

If we were better people. If we were perfect.

But we're not.

We're just ordinary hypocrites, doing what we can. Not what we can't.

But it's better than doing nothing at all.

Love is patient, says Paul to the church in Corinth.

Love is kind.

Love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude...

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

How many times have we heard this read in church?

Very often at weddings...

It's a wonderful poem in praise of love.

How many of us can live up to it?

Not one of us.

Yet we don't stop trying.

We don't stop committing to each other in love.

We don't stop wanting to be good partners, good friends, good companions here in this church community.

We don't stop engaging through our Housing and Community Services, through our Wednesday Club and Winter Night Shelter and Thursday Tea Time, with the work of transformation in our city.

We can't help everyone.

But we can help some.

And we can do it with love.

They may feel like small things.

But we speak and act in the spirit of Jeremiah, of Paul, of Jesus himself.

And each small thing makes a difference.

Let's give ourselves permission to be glorious hypocrites for the sake of the gospel.

Amen.