

Hinde Street Methodist Church

11am Sunday 17th March

Revd Val Reid

Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18

Luke 13: 31-35

Four years ago a fifteen-year-old girl ran away from Bethnal Green in East London.
Bored, frustrated, feeling left out of home and society.
She longed for a more meaningful life.
A life where she was valued.
Where she was part of something purposeful.
Something endorsed by God.

All of us were once teenagers.

Can you remember?

Did you feel like that?

I certainly sat in my room for hours on end reading Herman Hesse and wanting a less suburban life.

But – different time, different place – I painted my fingernails green.

And got sent to the chemistry lab at my grammar school to have the varnish removed.

I didn't go and join Isis.

Shamima Begum hit the headlines a few weeks ago when she asked to come home.

She was living in a refugee camp.

Two children had died, and third was about to be born.

Her request stirred up a hornet's nest.

The home secretary, Sajid Javid, refused permission for her to come back to the UK.

Then he stripped her of her British Citizenship.

When her third baby died, just three weeks after his birth, he told parliament:

The death of any British child, even those children born to a foreign terrorist fighter, of course is a tragedy – but the only person responsible for the death of that child is the foreign terrorist fighter.

On the whole, public opinion seemed to be on his side.

Isis have been responsible for terrorist atrocities, beheadings, ethnic cleansing.

There is no room in our country for people who endorse such practices.

Let her stay in Syria.

Or go back to Bangladesh.

Her father's country.

But not hers.

There have been questions about the legality of making someone stateless.

It's against international law.

Or was it about Javid's own leadership ambitions?

His desire to ride the wave of populist opinion?
Or was it about Shamima herself?
She didn't do herself any favours in that Sky TV interview.
She wouldn't say sorry.
She seemed to demand forgiveness as a right.
Who warms to petulant teenage girls?

But it raises bigger questions about belonging.
No-one doubts that running off to join Isis was wrong.
It shows at best naivety, at worse a callous disregard for human lives.
But Shamima was a teenage girl.
And a British citizen.
How bad do you have to be, to lose the right to belong to your country?

Today's lectionary reading from the Book of Genesis invites us to ask these kinds of questions.
Questions about belonging to the kingdom of heaven, rather than the kingdom of Great Britain.
Does our citizenship with God depend on our behaviour?
On being virtuous, and obedient, and pious?
Can we be stripped of the label 'Christian' if we are naughty?
Does God make us, effectively, stateless if we won't conform?

By Genesis chapter 15, Abram hasn't exactly covered himself with glory.
He has taken the risk of leaving home – but then leaving home was what nomadic tribesmen did.
They needed to find space for their flocks and herds.
They needed new territory.
We see something of the dilemma just before today's reading, when Abram and his nephew Lot find their followers getting into fights about access to grazing land.
They decide to separate.
To carve up the land between them – you go that way, I'll go this way.

But it was more complicated than that.
Those lands they divided up between them weren't empty.
They were already occupied.
Both Lot and Abram got caught up in the endless battles between the local tribes.
Abram, on this occasion, is the winner.
Though of course his security is bought at the expense of other lives.

Reading the accounts of this tribal warfare in Genesis, is not a million miles from the victories and defeats of Isis in the Middle East in recent years.

But in the middle of these battle stories comes this deeply odd encounter between God and Abram.
Abram has been promised blessing.
He has been promised territory.
He has been promised descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky.
But he has no children.
His heir is Eliezer of Damascus.
He wants some sort of promise. Some long-term security.

And so, on God's instructions, Abram sacrifices a heifer, a goat a ram, a dove and a pigeon.
He cuts the animals in half.
Though not the birds.
He sits there all day, driving off the vultures.
And then he falls asleep.
Falls into a deep and terrifying darkness.
And God passes between the severed carcasses, as fire and smoke.
And makes a covenant with Abram.

We don't have much evidence for the provenance of this strange ritual.
There's a reference in Jeremiah to a similar covenant, where the people who have made this oath, and failed to keep it, are threatened with death, like the animals themselves.
But this seems to be different.
It's not Abram who is making promises.
(I'll stop being so aggressive and live peacefully in this land...)
It is God.
Although Abram prepares for the ritual, it is God who says *I am with you.*
Always.
Cross my heart and hope to die.

The promise is unconditional.
In this first covenant with Abram, God is asking for nothing in return.
No good behaviour.
No ritual circumcision.
That all comes much later.
In all his journeying, Abram can be assured of God's presence.
And this promise is not just for Abram, but for all the people of Israel (though Israel is not yet a nation).
This is the first time – but not the last – that God will be with God's people as fire and cloud, through a difficult and terrifying journey.
And it is God who, in the life and death of Jesus, shows how far God is willing to go to companion the people he loves.

This is not conditional citizenship.
This is unconditional love.
This is a commitment to remain faithful, whatever happens.
This is the divine willingness to become vulnerable for the sake of loved humanity.

Abram is not a great role model.
But he represents us.
Faithful and faithless.
Obedient and also violent.
Deeply engaged in conversation with God, but also egotistic and selfish.

But it is to this flawed human being that God makes a promise.
What the Hebrew Scriptures call *Hesed*.
Loving faithfulness.
A promise that will not be broken. Whatever it takes.

This week is the thirtieth anniversary of the world wide web.

In 1989 Tim Berners-Lee, a fellow at the Cern physics research laboratory, sent a memo to his boss titled *Information management: a proposal*.

He proposed a system called *Mesh*.

A way for researchers to share information about their experiments through a new invention, hypertext.

His boss labelled the memo *vague but exciting*.

The following year, Tim Berners-Lee started writing code for the project, which had a new name.

The Word Wide Web.

Every year, on the anniversary of his creation, Tim Berners-Lee publishes an open letter on his vision for the future of the web.

This year he wrote:

*While the web has created opportunity
Given marginalised groups a voice
And made our daily lives easier,
It has also created opportunity for scammers
Given a voice to those who spread hatred
And made all kinds of crime easier to commit.*

It was videos on the internet that radicalised Shamima Begum.

It was the livestreaming of the slaughter at two mosques in Christchurch on Friday that caused such heartache and such outrage.

Like each individual human being, like the tribe of Israel, like the United Kingdom, the World Wide Web is a flawed creation.

But God's covenant says that God won't give up on us.

Flawed as we are.

Just as Jesus, in today's passage from Luke's gospel, can't give up on Jerusalem.

*Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...*

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem.

He is under no illusions about what will happen there.

In this passage there may be Pharisees who want to warn him about the political threat of Herod.

But he knows that most of them have their own concerns about his ministry and his teaching.

He knows that religious and political powers will collude to get rid of him.

And yet he keeps on putting one foot in front of the other.

Heading for the cross.

He knows that the people will be shouting *Hosanna* one moment.

And *Crucify him* the next.

But he still loves them.

This morning we have dedicated a new font here at Hinde Street.

It's a beautiful design.

A hand blown glass bowl to hold the water for baptisms.

On the wooden stand are engraved the names of David and Elizabeth Hicks.

Both were baptised here at Hinde Street.

Baptised into the family of this church.

But more than that - baptised into the community of God's unconditional love.

In our baptismal liturgy, we say this:

For you Jesus Christ came into the world;

For you he lived and showed God's love;

For you he suffered death on the cross;

For you he triumphed over death,

Rising to newness of life;

For you he prays at God's right hand:

All this for you

Before you could know anything of it.

In your baptism

The word of scripture is fulfilled:

We love, because God first loved us.

These are powerful words.

A long way from Abram's odd sacrificial ritual in the desert.

But saying the same thing.

I am for you.

Not because you are a good person.

Not because you promise to behave yourself.

Not because you will never make any mistakes.

Not because you will guarantee to come to church every Sunday and promise to be on a committee when there's a vacancy.

Not because from the moment the water touches your forehead, you will be a miraculously perfect human being.

But because God loves you.

God loves me.

Full stop.

That's why, in the Methodist Church, we baptise babies who can't answer for themselves.

Because God's love doesn't depend on their promises.

It depends on God's own faithfulness.

In our Baptismal liturgy, any promises that parents and godparents make come after the baptism.

Because God loves this child.

Nothing else is needed.

Any commitments we make, as the family of this child, are in response to God's commitment to us first of all.

That's why in the Methodist Church we recognise two sacraments.
Holy Communion and Baptism.
In both, ordinary things of earth become for us the things of heaven.
Because God has promised.
Bread and wine.
Water.
Everyday things infused with the presence of God.
Not because we perform some weird ritual.
Or because we make some promises which we probably won't be able to keep.
But because God is utterly reliable.

When Martin Luther was working on his translation of the Bible from Greek into German, he was subject to terrible doubt.
Was he doing the right thing?
What forces might he unleash if everyone could read the holy words of Scripture for themselves?
How right he was!
He saw these doubts, these temptations to give up, as coming from the devil.
And he could be heard, all over the castle where he was working, throwing his inkpot at the demon who tempted him.
And shouting:
I am baptised.

Not I was baptised.
But I am baptised.

For what it's worth, I'm not sure that I believe in a personal devil.
I am not willing to label people who do terrible things as purely evil.
Whether it's Shamima Begum.
Or even Brenton Tarrant.
People do evil things.
But they are still people for whom Jesus died.
Jerusalem, Jerusalem,
the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!
How often have I desired to gather your children together
as a hen gathers her brood under her wings...

After the attack on the Al Noor Mosque and Linwood Masjid, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, had this to say:

Many of those who will have been directly affected by this shooting may be migrants to New Zealand, they may even be refugees here.
They have chosen to make New Zealand their home, and it is their home.
They are us.
The person who has perpetuated this violence against us is not.
They have no place in New Zealand.
You may have chosen us, but we utterly reject and condemn you.

There are forces for evil in this world.
Things go horribly wrong.
We do things that, in retrospect, we wish we had never done.
We are tempted to behave in ways that are a long way from our best selves.
We do things that all right-minded people will utterly condemn.

But we ourselves are not utterly condemned.
Salvation is somehow big enough for all of us.
We are baptised.
God is with us.
And God, not evil, will have the last word.

Our task is to wrestle with what that might mean in the life of our communities.

How do we show love to Muslims, who feel so vulnerable today?
Many Christians around our country have stood outside Mosques this weekend offering prayer and friendship.
In New Zealand, churches have opened their doors for Muslims to pray, as the government has warned mosques to stay closed.

But how do we show love to Shamima Begum?
How do we show love to the man who shot and killed 49 Muslims at prayer?
That is much more challenging.

But, as people baptised into the community of God, we start from love.
Not from hate.
We start from belonging, not from excluding.
We start from commitment, not from estrangement.
We start from accepting a collective responsibility for creating the society we live in.
With all its good.
And all its evil.

Tim Berners-Lee, in his open letter this week, reminds us that things are not, of themselves, good or bad.
They are used for good – or for bad – by us.
He doesn't wish the web were un-invented.
But he does challenge us to take responsibility for how we use it.

*The web is for everyone,
And collectively we hold the power to change it.
It won't be easy.
But if we dream a little and work a lot, we can get the web we want.*

I think baptism calls us to dream a little and work a lot.
For the people we want.
For the world we want.
Amen.