

Hinde Street Methodist Church

11am Sunday 26th May 2019

Revd Val Reid

Rev 21: 10, 22 – 22: 5

John 5: 1-9

A Buddhist goes into a burger bar.
He walks up to the guy at the counter.
What does he say?
Make me one with everything.

I just came across that joke this week, in a book on mindfulness and spirituality.
It made me laugh.
But it also made me think.
What is my worldview?
And how does it affect the way I live my life?

On Thursday we voted in the European Elections.
For some this was a scandal – we voted two years ago to leave this labyrinthine institution.
Why should we spend money and time and energy on voting for something we want to cut ourselves free from?
For others it was a lifeline – an opportunity to say that, for all its flaws, we are still part of the European project.
For now.
For others it was a bit of an ethical dilemma.
Should we vote tactically?
Or follow our hearts?
Or should we abstain from voting at all?
Because it was all too difficult and complicated and no-one has clean hands and a pure heart.

On the bus to Hinde Street on Thursday morning, having queued up to vote for the first time that I can remember, I read the JPIT blog on voting.
Well done Will – it was a great read!
And it said some important stuff.

It was headed: *Turning up when it's difficult.*

We need to engage with these issues.
Even when there are no easy answers.
Because if we don't make our voice heard, then other voices will be too loud.
And because, in a representative democracy, this is the only way we have to lay out our vision for what our country should look like.
It's better than throwing a banana and salted caramel milkshake at a politician.
However much it – reprehensibly – made me smile.

Our first reading this morning was from the book of Revelation.
The lectionary wisely avoids this book most of the time.
Too weird.
Too difficult to understand.
Too much like watching the final episode of Game of Thrones when you haven't watched the previous 72.

Just as an experiment I typed *Game of thrones what are...?* into Google.

I got the following suggestions:

...what are the seven kingdoms?

...the white walkers?

...the andals?

...the dragons' names?

... what are they saying?

... what are they fighting for?

Indeed.

In these last two chapters of the book of Revelation, we have John's vision of the Holy City.

The New Jerusalem.

What would our society be like if God were in charge?

What sort of community would God like to see, if She had half a chance?

No Temple.

No need for ritualised sacrifice.

No need for the Holy of Holies where God is hidden away.

Trapped.

Accessible only to a few.

There is a long history of suspicion of temple worship in Jewish thinking.

It's too open to manipulation.

Too tempting to tie God down in human bricks and mortar.

But there is also a long history of feeling bereft when the temple is destroyed, or when the people are exiled from the temple.

Here, in the New Jerusalem, the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the only temple we need.

God is here.

God is for everyone.

No need for artificial light.

Or even for sun or moon.

Because God is our light.

We see everything in the radiance of divine glory.

In a book where glory has been shown to be deceptive, where it has been abused and misused, at last we see what glory is about.

Not a system of hierarchy.

Not a way of grabbing power and holding on to it.

But a guiding light for everyone.

Its gates will never be shut.

In first century Middle Eastern culture, the cities had a tense relationship with the countryside.

It was outside the city that food was grown and animals were kept.

The city couldn't survive without corn and figs and oil and sheep.

But it was inside the city that there was security when neighbouring tribes raided the area.

The city was where the farmers and vineyard owners and shepherds could take refuge when they were under threat.

When the psalmist shouts *Lift up your heads oh ye gates, and be ye lifted up ye everlasting doors...*

It's a cry of desperation.

Let us in.

Our survival depends on it.

You can see that there was a lot of scope for rivalry and suspicion here.

For the city people, the ideal would be open gates when they needed to import all the delicious foodstuffs that kept them alive.

And closed gates when rampaging tribes were overrunning the plains, and every additional mouth to feed reduced the viability of surviving a siege.

But in the New Jerusalem, God's Holy City, the gates are always open.

No-one owns a monopoly of the water supply – the river of the water of life flows freely through the middle of the street of the city.

By the river grows the tree of life, with its twelve kinds of fruit.

And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

Healthcare will no longer be a postcode lottery.

Or the privilege of the wealthy.

Or of those with a home address.

Or of those with official leave to remain.

Or of those with a network of friends and relations to care for them.

So what is our vision of society?

And how big is the gap between that vision, and where we live now?

How does that vision affect our voting?

And – indeed – our living?

In our gospel reading we have a little glimpse of what it looks like to live in that gap.

After this, John tells us, *there was a festival of the Jews, and Jesus went up to Jerusalem.*

After this?

'This' was the story of the healing of a Royal Official's son in Capernaum.

A man used to command.

To getting what he wants.

And who gets exactly what he asks for – the miraculous healing of his sick child.

Then we cut to Jerusalem.

John doesn't tell us which festival – but the three great pilgrimage festivals were Passover, Tabernacles and Pentecost.

Passover celebrates freedom from slavery.

Tabernacles celebrates the harvest – food for everyone.

Pentecost celebrates the giving of the Torah.

Rules for a holy society.

And here we have many invalids – blind, lame and paralysed – lying around a pool which is supposed to have miraculous powers.

One man has been there for 38 years, because he has no-one to put him into the pool when the water is stirred.

In the middle of a festival celebrating liberty, plenty, community – this man reminds us that our societies can be places where people get left out.

Where we can be worshipping God and counting our blessings, while others are very much not.

I have often preached on this story.

And I have often heard sermons on this story.

And preachers often focus on Jesus' question to the man,

Do you want to be made well?

But I think this story is also about the society in which such things can happen.

And Jesus' question to us is:

Do you want to live in a community where a man can be overlooked and excluded for 38 years?

In the follow-up to this story, which is not in today's lectionary reading, John tells us how certain groups reacted to Jesus' miracle.

It's the Sabbath.

It's not lawful for you to carry your mat.

This was part of a long Jewish tradition of midrash, of debate.

Taking a day of rest was an important part of how to live life in all its fullness.

No work.

But what constitutes 'work' on the Sabbath?

Professor Amy-Jill Levine, who ran an inspirational workshop here on Thursday on Jewish perspectives on the Christian gospel, told us about her young son who was learning the violin.

His music teacher told him to practice every day that he breathed.

His orthodox rabbi told him not to practice on the Sabbath.

How did she resolve it?

She asked her son – what do you think?

Do you play the violin, or do you work the violin?

Play.

So he practiced.

There are no simplistic answers to this dilemma.

But Jesus is engaging with an ongoing ethical debate.

What is involved in the kind of life that mirrors God's love?

Yes to time off.

But also yes to healing and integration for those who are alienated.

No wonder that in the New Jerusalem the gates are open.

The river of life runs through the streets of the city.

The leaves of the tree of life are for the healing of the nations.

Life in all its fullness is for everyone.

God is for everyone.

But that's not how things are here.

In our city. In our society.

And however much we wrestled with how to vote on Thursday, and however we feel the results expected tonight do – or don't – reflect our vision, we continue to be a society riven with discord.

I fear that the whole Brexit debate, and the ambitions of wannabe Tory leaders, have distracted us from some of the very serious issues we face as a country.

Philip Alston, the UN special rapporteur, published a report on austerity in Britain this week.

Poverty in the UK is systematic, he claims.

It's like a return to the Victorian Workhouse ethic.

14 million people – a fifth of the population – live in poverty.

The UK's social safety net has been "*deliberately removed and replaced with a harsh and uncaring ethos*".

Amber Rudd, the work and pensions secretary, has responded by announcing that she will lodge a formal complaint with the UN.

Alston is politically biased.

He didn't do enough research.

Immediately the issue has become polarised.
It has become a battleground for ideology.
It reminds me of those who used Jesus' healing of the man at the pool as political capital.
Instead of asking questions about a society where such things could happen, they become defensive.
Or aggressive.
Or both.

So where do we go from here?
What is our role as Christians, and as a church?
Both a local church community, and a national Methodist Connexion?

Here's an issue we might think about as an example.

Last week the 2019 Methodist Conference agenda was published.
Now you are probably thinking – so what?
More amendments to CPD.
Pass the Sudoku.

But one report has been prompting a lot of discussion.
It's the report from the marriage and relationships task force.
It's called '*God in love unites us*'.
It proposes that we should amend our theological understanding of marriage so that it represents:
a life-long union in body, mind and spirit of two people who freely enter it.
Two people.
Not necessarily a man and a woman – which is the current definition.

It proposes that the Methodist Church authorises local church councils to register local churches to conduct same sex marriages, if they so choose.

This will be debated in Conference.
The report proposes that Conference be asked to provisionally accept the report.
And that it then goes out to Districts and Circuits and Churches for consultation.
And comes back next year, 2020, for confirmation.
Or otherwise.

What will this consultation look like?
This issue, across the Connexion, is as divisive as Brexit.
It touches on matters of relationship and sexuality which deeply matter to us as human beings.
It engages with that perennially fascinating subject – how do we read the Bible?
But it also challenges to answer that question we began with.
What sort of society do we want to see?
Do we want the gates to be open wide?
Do we want God to be available to everybody?
No exceptions?

Make me one with everything?

Terry Eagleton is a contemporary philosopher I find endlessly fascinating.
He reminds us that hope is performative.
We create the thing we want to see by the way we behave. Here and now.
The end is inescapably embedded in the means.

So how will we have these conversations over the next year?
How will we speak on this subject?
How will we listen?
Will we be able to disagree well?
Can we embody the ideal of that Conference report of 2005 *Pilgrimage of Faith*?
Can we continue to travel together, even though we may not see eye to eye on everything?

Or will we, like the Jewish authorities who opposed Jesus, like Amber Rudd faced with the UN report, will we turn it into a battle?

How will we – each of us as individuals, the Hinde Street community, the Methodist Church – how will we embody the vision of the New Jerusalem over the next year?

Those of you who were here at the end of September last year may remember that I brought this icon to Hinde Street to be blessed.

I'd just spent a week writing it at Turvey Abbey.

It's an icon of the New Jerusalem.

The gates, as you can see, are open wide.

And here is the tree of life, with its health-giving leaves.

When I created the river, Sister Esther taught me a new technique.

The pigment was mixed, as usual, with egg tempera, but also with grit.

It was allowed to dry overnight.

The next day I scraped off the grit with a palette knife.

It left this wonderful mottled, energetic, blue water.

But I couldn't get all the grit out.

Some of it was too firmly attached to the gesso.

If I wanted to keep the gorgeous colour, I had to leave some of the grit there too.

If you run your fingers over the surface of the icon, you can feel it.

The New Jerusalem is a vision of how things might be.

Will be, one day.

But not now.

Now there is grit in the pigment.

But we are the body of Christ.

We are called to live out of that vision.

We are called to read those stories of the mission and ministry of Jesus.

To pay close attention as he shows us how to create community.

To make sure that non-one is too poor or too ill or too different to belong.

To take care that we don't get sucked into that mind-set that refuses to engage with the nuanced debates about what makes for a good life.

Because we think we know the answers already.

We are called to go and do likewise.

Amen.