

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 30th June 2019 11am

Revd Val Reid

Drudgery divine - what difference does our Christian faith make to relationships at home and at work?

Colossians 3: 18 – 4: 18

It's late at night.

Through the wall, you can hear a row escalating in your neighbour's flat.

He's shouting.

She's screaming.

Get off me.

Get out of my flat.

What do you do?

Do you go and knock on the door, to see if you can diffuse the situation?

When there's no response, do you call the police?

Do you record the argument on your smartphone?

Do you pass the recording to a national newspaper?

We've all been caught up in this week's personal and political soap opera.

We're all invited to take a view.

What would you have done?

What would I have done?

Does it matter whether you're a Boris fan or not?

Actually, I think not.

I think this raises that perennially fascinating – and divisive – question.

What is the relationship between my personal life and my public role?

I remember going to see *Amadeus* at the National Theatre in 1979.

Paul Schofield, as Salieri, stood on the stage, frozen, mesmerised, disgusted.

A young Simon Callow, playing Mozart, was scuttling round the stage on all fours, playing slutty games with his fiancée.

How could God have gifted such genius, such sublime music, to this childish moron?

Is it OK to admire the paintings of Caravaggio, when the man was a violent street brawler, a convicted murderer, a perpetrator of 16th century knife crime?

Is Winston Churchill a great role model for a church that hosts so many iconic AA meetings?

I suspect we would all offer a different perspective.

But I think Paul – or whoever wrote the letter to the Colossians in the name of Paul – would have a very clear answer.

Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord.

Personal relationships, family relationships, workplace relationships – they are all part of the way we live out our Christian faith.

I'm not saying that public figures don't deserve a private life.

Of course they do.

But there must be a kind of integrity in the way we all live, whether it's in church, or in public, or when we are in the privacy of our own homes.

*Teach me, my God and King,
In all things thee to see,
And what I do in anything
To do it as for thee.*

Well, yes.

But...

As always, it's not quite that simple, is it?

For one thing, what constitutes Christian behaviour?

And for another, how do we live with ourselves as flawed human beings?

I want to explore those two questions this morning in a little more detail.

Firstly, what constitutes Christian behaviour?

Well, the writer of Colossians is quite clear.

Wives should be subject to their husbands.

Children should obey their parents.

Slaves should obey their masters.

When Peter was making the plan, he did quite a lot of shifting of dates around so that I would be here at Hinde Street to preach on one of the Sundays in Bible month.

As it happens, I have been given this peach of a reading – the fourth section of the letter to the church at Colossae.

If we were following the lectionary, as we usually do, I would be preaching on something nice and simple – Jesus' conversation with his disciples about whether he should nuke an inhospitable Samaritan village.

The lectionary wisely steers clear of subservient wives and advice on how to treat your slaves.

This passage is never set, throughout our three year cycle.

But – as you know – I strongly believe that we are not called to avoid the difficult stuff.

In his sermon on the means of grace, John Wesley commanded all Christians to pray, to take the sacrament, and to wrestle with the Bible.

Not just to read it – to wrestle with it.

He knew that making sense of these words for our contemporary culture was not an easy task.

So – here goes.

I think there is a fundamental issue here, which we don't often hear preached from our pulpits.

How do we read the Bible?

What is this book – this collection of books – which we have inherited?

Was it dictated by God, word for word, as the angel Moroni dictated the translation of the Book of Mormon to Joseph Smith, with the aid of a pair of miraculous translation spectacles?

Or was it written by a wide variety of blokes – and it was, of course, pretty much all blokes – so long ago, that nowadays we can pretty much ignore most of it as irrelevant?

In 1998 the Methodist Conference produced what I think is one of their best reports.

A lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

It's about 'the nature of authority and the place of the Bible in the Methodist church'.

I think it says two key things.

Often in church on a Sunday morning the reader will end their reading with 'This is the word of the Lord' and we all reply 'Thanks be to God.'

But the report says this is not strictly true.

God reveals Godself in creation, in the law, through the prophets, through the stories of God's people, and supremely, in the life and death and resurrection of Jesus.

The word of the Lord is Jesus himself.

All these words in this book are just about God.

They are not God.

And secondly, all translation involves interpretation.

I remember learning Biblical Hebrew when I was at theological college.

It was fascinating.

Not so much because I am good at languages – I'm not – but because it was a wonderful insight into the whole process of how we receive the text.

Here's one example I struggled with.

We focused on a few chapters from the second book of Samuel.

In this story, Mephibosheth, one of the sons of the deposed King Saul, is summoned to the new King David.

The writer tells us that he was 'smitten' in both ankles.

Mephibosheth was lame.

But the Hebrew word for 'lame' is smitten.

It implies a deity that does the smiting.

And, inevitably, a degree of judgement.

What had he done to deserve smiting?

So how do we translate this little, passing reference into English?

In the 21st Century, when we don't believe that God causes disability?

Do we?

Do we say that Mephibosheth was differently abled?

Or do we need to put in some wording that explains the worldview of a culture that couldn't imagine disability being anything other than a punishment from God?

The book of Job wrestles with that one.

Will a footnote be enough??

The Deed of Union says that 'the divine revelation, which is recorded in the Holy Scriptures is the supreme authority for the Church'.

It does not say that the Bible is the supreme authority.

It says that 'our doctrines are based upon God's revelation which is recorded in the Bible'.

It does not say that our Methodist doctrines are taken straight from the Bible.

So there is a good deal of interpretation to be done when we come to read our sacred texts.

A Lamp to my feet offers seven models of interpretation.

At one end of the continuum is the idea that 'the Bible is the Word of God, and is therefore inerrant.'

At the other end is the view that 'The Bible comprises a diverse and often contradictory collection of documents which represent the experiences of various people in various times and places.'

It's a useful resource, but our own reason and our own experience are much better guides.

So where do I stand, as a lifelong Methodist, a preacher for 40 years, a priest for 8?

I believe the Bible is a valuable resource.

I believe it is inspired by God.

I believe it contains the stories of people's attempts to make sense of God across millennia.

But I believe we are given our own minds and our own intelligence for a reason.

Tempting as it is, we cannot simply download the Bible as a rulebook for life, and absolve ourselves of all responsibility.

Just as the Spirit inspired the men – and perhaps one woman – who wrote these texts, so the Spirit can inspire us as we reflect on what they might mean for us, here and now.

And this isn't just an academic exercise.

Tomorrow morning, in Birmingham, Conference will begin debating the report on marriage and relationships.

Are we bound by the few Biblical texts that prohibit same sex relationships, as they were understood two thousand years ago?

Or do we have some work to do to open our minds and hearts to what God might be saying to us today?

And if so, where do we start with the task of interpretation?

So in the light of all that, let's have a look at our text from Colossians.

The 'household code'.

This letter to the church at Colossae was probably written around 60 AD.

Nearly 2,000 years ago.

'Household Codes' were common in the Ancient world.

You can find them in Stoic philosophy, in the works of Aristotle, in early Hellenistic Jewish ethical teaching.

This is the first 'Christian' version.

What is the writer trying to do?

The subversive Christian movement became very attractive to those at the bottom of the rigidly stratified Roman society.

Women and slaves joined in great numbers.

This raised quite a lot of suspicion and criticism amongst conservatives.

The thin end of the wedge.

Where would we be if there were no longer slave or free, male or female, Jew or gentile?

Harrumph.

Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells.

Or Colossae.

So there is quite a lot of pressure on the writer of this household code not to be too radical.

To signal to the outside world that Christians are not trying to overturn the social order.

That they can be relied on to behave sensibly, and manage their own households appropriately.

In a time when persecution was a real threat, this was important.

So here are some questions for us as we read these injunctions two thousand years later.

Do we want to conform to the social standards of our day?

Do we want to signal that we are safe and reliable?

Or do we want to say that some things are more important than fitting in?

That there are some core principles to Christian living which we will hold on to, regardless of what others think?

And if so, what are these core principles?

It's interesting, I think, that this household code holds within it the seeds of Christian subversion.

Yes – wives should be subject to their husbands.

But husbands should love their wives and never treat them harshly.

Agape.

The same love that Christ showed so powerfully on the cross.

This is not exactly women as goods and chattels.

This is women as fellow human beings.

Later in the letter, the writer – perhaps Paul himself at this stage – sends greetings to Nympha and the church in her house.

We know from the letters and from the book of Acts that women played a key role in the early house churches.

We know from the gospel stories that women were the first witnesses of the resurrection.

So if we were framing this code for 2019, what we say about relationships between men and women?

What would we say about arranged marriages?

About female genital mutilation?

About access to education for girls across the world?

About the stained glass ceiling in the church?

Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.

In the first century, ownership of slaves was axiomatic.

It was just assumed that this was how society operated.

At that time, a third of the population in Greece and Italy were slaves.

During the great debates about slavery in the 18th and 19th century, Biblical approval of slave-owning was a core argument of those who sought to maintain the – very profitable – system.

Including many within the church.

But the writer of Colossians encourages his readers to think about this from the perspective of Christ.

Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in Heaven.

Husbands and wives, children and parents, slaves and owners – all are moral agents in their own right. All have a relationship with God.

All can make choices about how they live their lives.

All owe it to God to take their ethical decisions seriously.

There is a reciprocity about how we relate to each other, and to God, which is important.

And we are reminded that in all these relationships, the mundane becomes sacred.

*Who sweeps a room as for thy laws
Makes that and the action fine.*

I said earlier that I wanted to explore two questions which this passage throws up for me.

What constitutes Christian behaviour?

And how do we live with ourselves as flawed human beings?

Because however we wrestle with the scriptures, however we interpret the texts we have inherited, however we reconstitute them for ourselves in a very different context from their first writers, we are still left with the truth of our flawed selves.

Yes – I believe passionately that we cannot ring-fence sections of our lives and say that I can behave as I like here.

God doesn't get to dictate how I behave in the world of finance, or the world of arms-dealing, or the world of environmental caretaking, or the world of my personal relationships.

Every aspect of our lives becomes subject to the work of grace.

But – we make mistakes.

We get it wrong.

We sometimes behave selfishly.

We are probably not slave-owners, but can we honestly, hand on heart, say that we have never acted in a way that exploits a fellow human being for our own gain?

That we have never expected a partner to sacrifice their own preferences to prioritise ours?

That our kids should do what they're told simply because I say so?

This letter to the church at Colossae reminds us that, in the end, we are all works in progress.

If, with Christ, you died to all this – the writer asks – why do you still live as though you still belonged to the world?

Why do you still get it wrong?

Yes, I can identify with this.

We are all on a journey.

We are all in the process of letting go of the habits and behaviours that belong to our old, selfish selves.

We are all learning, day by day, what it means to be clothed with love.

Our life is indeed hidden with Christ in God – and each day, each conversation, each relationship, each decision in the supermarket is an opportunity to uncover that hidden life, that person we are called to be.

We can't be perfect in our own strength.

So no wonder the writer of this letter reminds his readers to:

Devote yourselves to prayer

Keeping alert in it

With thanksgiving.

Notice what's going on.

Pay attention.

Look out for where God is at work in you, and in others.

Each one of us – individuals with names and roles just like the people named at the end of this letter.

Each one of us known and loved by God.

Each one of us called to grow towards fullness in Christ, who holds all things together.

Each one of us relying not on our own sense of ought and should – and our inability to live up to our own standards – but on God, who was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross.

Grace be with you. Amen.