

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 7th July 2019

11am Revd Peter Cornick

“The kingdom of God has come near to you.”

Galatians 6: 1-6, 7-16, Luke 10: 1-11, 16-20

On the occasion of welcoming new members, those transferring membership and those re-affirming their Christian commitment.

Introduction: who we are in the context of the world

Standing in the office of the Foreign Secretary, on Friday – he wasn't there – I was aware of its grandeur, its history, its lofty view of Horse Guards Parade. The tour I was on, had shown me paintings and murals which, in rather politically incorrect fashion for today's taste, suggested Britannia once ruled the waves and quite a lot of the land too. So, it was surprising to find, rather incongruously, in the office of the Foreign Secretary, a painting by Grayson Perry, called, *'Map of Nowhere.'*

The painting is styled on medieval religious maps. These maps depicted the order of the world through Christian eyes; the Mappa Mundi is the famous example. Grayson Perry's map, however, replaces the perceived *order* of religion with modern chaos. Art critics note that in Perry's painting, there is 'a cacophony of ideas and preoccupations, with 'Doubt' right at the centre.' To add to the chaos, 'people pray at the churches of global corporations' whilst 'the 'free-market-economy floats un-tethered'.¹ It is a picture of religion being thrown out and replaced by a disturbed world of greed and cynicism.

If visiting ambassadors are shown the imperialistic murals, followed by the Grayson Perry, I wonder what they think Britain stands for?

Sending out – who we are in the world

I tell you all this for two reasons.

The first, is because the Foreign Secretary, chooses the painting to hang on the wall from the government's art collection. As such, we have a window into the mind of the incumbent Minister. It says something about who he – in this case – is, or what he likes or indeed believes in. And after all, the Foreign Secretary is the principal ambassador for Britain. Who he, or she, is, communicates to others something about Britain. What she or he believes, matters.

Jesus sends out seventy followers. They go:

ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go.

They are the ambassadors. Who they are, what they believe, and how they communicate, matters.

The second reason for telling you of my tour of the Foreign Office, is the content of the several paintings I saw. They speak of the world in which, as Christians, we are placed. The old murals remind us of a colonial past where we cannot ignore that Christianity sanctioned state oppression. It fostered a superior view of the world, which still lingers on in our institutions today, including the church. The modern art rejects both religion *and* modernity, speaking of a disordered world.

The reality of a broken world of our tradition and present matter.

Jesus tells those he sends out:

See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves.

There are those who will reject you; there are those who will misunderstand your motives.

¹ <http://visualarts.britishcouncil.org/collection/artists/perry-grayson-1960/object/map-of-nowhere-perry-2008-p8194>

And, for those who in this service, mark various stages in the journey of their discipleship, their following of Jesus, this applies to you too. Who you are, what you believe and how you communicate it, matters; to you, to your sisters and brothers in Christ, to those you meet. And so, today, signs, symbols and words of commitment, to Christ. This matters.

And you cannot be followers, disciples, of Jesus, except in today's world – which experiences its chaos, and its Christian tradition with its ambiguous past.

Marked by Christ

Paul wanted to be clear, in his world, whose ambassador he was. In Galatians, he speaks of outward physical signs which mark the adherence to the Jewish faith. Some Christians felt they needed to conform to these signs prior to professing Christianity. Not so, says Paul. The only mark one needs, is the cross of Jesus Christ.

Paul writes:

I carry the marks of Jesus, branded on my body.

Who Paul was, and what he believed was critical. Paul wanted to be clear, that he had died with Christ to an old way. His old way was that of persecuting Christians. So, he rose with Christ to be a new creation.

Further, he says:

Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.

In the context of the world in which he lived, it is his very much changed actions, deeds and whole person, which embody this cross of Christ.

How does bearing the marks of the cross, change your life, your words, your deeds?

Being a Methodist

I know those of you who are making new commitments today, have been following a course called, 'Being a Methodist'. You have discovered how belonging to Christ, via a particular group with a certain tradition, changes your life and that of others.

You have discovered, no doubt, that John Wesley was himself on a Christian journey. An enthusiast for Bible reading at university; a failure in his mission to America; completely transformed at Aldersgate Street with his warmed heart; the Christian life has its ups and downs. You and I both will.

You will have studied, no doubt, that to be a Methodist, is to believe that all – yes all, can be loved by God through Jesus; can know their failings forgiven. To be a Methodist is to accept all – at Hinde Street, we embody this idea through 'inclusivity'; no matter how people identify themselves in terms of gender or sexuality, in ability or ethnicity, all are welcome, and can know God's love for who they are. And to be a Methodist is to remember constantly, that we often exclude others, by thought, word or deed, even unconsciously. To be a Methodist, is to seek God's forgiveness, and seek the Spirit's guidance in more Christlike living.

Being a Methodist is also working alongside people with widely differing opinions about how to live in the light of God. This was very evident during Methodist Conference last week, during the discussions about marriage and relationships. Those of different theologies, were, remarkably, working together, supporting motions to try and maintain the unity of Christ. It is not easy to exist together with divergent opinions – sometimes very painful. And people told stories of that pain in conference. I remember speaking at Conference some years back on this subject. I remember afterwards being thanked by one gay minister, who was overjoyed that someone had spoken up for him, who wasn't gay. But I equally remember at the same time, colleagues who made it clear they were disappointed with my speech. To be a Methodist is to live out, with integrity, one's theology, who you are, but also to struggle to live with that of others.

Who we are as Methodists – as Christians, in the world in which we live, matters. Because the world notices how we relate to one another – how we communicate God's love for all.

Paul writes to the Galatians:

So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all, and especially for those of the family of faith.

Practical advice for being a follower

Thankfully, when Jesus sends the seventy out, he offers some practical advice. I think the advice is of use to those of you embarking on the next stage of your journey with Christ – and of use to me.

1. *Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road.*

What do you need for this journey? No extras. Just a love of Christ. Represented by you. Or as Paul said, carry the marks of Jesus. His cross is self-sacrificial love for the sake of others. No other bag is needed.

What, and not greet anyone on the road? Perhaps Jesus is saying, don't get distracted on the journey with me. We know it's easy to do so. Through its paintings, the world will tell you religion has caused trouble or is redundant. The world will invite you to join its chaos and worship at the corporate church. Greet no-one on the road.

But do go in pairs. The Christian journey is not meant to be solitary. Bear one another's burdens says Paul. Value your 'class meeting' – being a Methodist. Eat with others, and don't move from house to house. I wonder if this implies, spend time, working out, struggling honestly with the faith with a small group of people. It may take some time.

2. *Whatever house you enter, first say, "Peace to this house!" And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person*

I want you to notice, that it is 'your' peace which will rest on the person – why not God's? It is your peace because you are the one rooted in Christ. It is you who is the ambassador. You, in person, bring God's peace. And notice too, that if your peace is not reciprocated, Jesus does not invite you to manipulate the person until they do receive it, but the peace will simply return to you.

3. *Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you ... say to them, "The kingdom of God has come near to you."*

But notice too, that when there is rejection from the world you live in, and you are wiping the dust from your feet as you leave, perhaps a little dejected that you have been misunderstood, nonetheless:

know this: the kingdom of God has come near."

Conclusion

And that is what you are called to be – those who go for Jesus; those sent out – his ambassadors if you like – to reflect him in who you are, in the complexities of the world today.

- For when those followers, or disciples of Jesus, have honestly shared one another's burdens, *the kingdom of God has come near.*
- When they have sought to understand what it means to bring peace to communities often divided, *the kingdom of God has come near.*
- If there has been the sharing of food and conversation, where the richness of faith is discovered, *the kingdom of God has come near.*

As you make new steps in following Christ, I pray, 'Peace to this house', for "the kingdom of God has come near'.