

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 28th July 2019 11am

Revd Val Reid

Genesis 18:20-32

Psalm 138

Luke 11:1-13

In the High Pulpit

When Albert Einstein started his new job at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, he asked for ‘*a desk or table, a chair, paper and pencils*’.

Oh yes – and a large wastebasket, so I can throw away all my mistakes.

I wish.

Wouldn't it be good if we all had one of those?

The trouble with ministry is that all our mistakes are very public ones.

Very few opportunities to screw up the paper and throw it away into an obscure bin under the desk.

I have never in eight years preached from up here.

And from time to time I have said that before I leave, I'll give it a go.

So here I am, in the high pulpit.

Wouldn't it be nice if all our lives could be lived six feet above contradiction?

Or six feet above mistakes?

But that's not how life works out, is it?

Mistakes are not the sole prerogative of ministers.

We all make them.

Some are pretty trivial.

Some are very serious.

This week, we are all looking at the consequences of what could be a vast collective mistake.

Ever since Tuesday, I've been reading comments on social media, from people I like and respect, about Boris and his new cabinet.

Critical comments.

Judgemental comments.

Yes, the man has said and done things which have appalled me.

And so have some of the people he has surrounded himself with.

I'm tempted to join in with the chorus of disapproval.

Always so enjoyable to criticise others.

And to be up here, above criticism oneself.

But if I've learned one thing in my eight years of ministry here at Hinde Street, I've learned that there is always another side to the story. Always another perspective.

Always – behind the selves we present to the world – another self which is rarely seen.

Another voice which is seldom heard.

So perhaps we should wait and see what the coming days and weeks bring.

What these people whom we have entrusted with our common good manage to do with the responsibility they have been gifted.

That's not an excuse to give up.

To keep quiet.

To fail to challenge injustice or inequality when we see it.

On Thursday the Joint Public Issues Team sent a letter to the New Prime Minister, reminding him that *a no-deal Brexit is gambling with the basic needs of our poorest citizens*.

It was signed by the leaders of seven denominations, including our President and vice-president.

Others were invited to sign.

By this morning, there were 1295 signatories – church leaders and concerned lay people from a wide range of denominations.

You'll see my signature there at number 159.

You may want to sign up too – it's on the JPIT website.

Because speaking up for those who can't speak up for themselves – that's one of the things we do well in the Methodist church.

And particularly here at Hinde Street.

We are a church that believes that politics can't be divorced from faith.

If this Christianity business matters, it matters in every area of life.

It's not just a Sunday morning club.

I hear from many of you that one of the reasons you feel at home in this church is because thoughtful preaching and radical politics and social action belong together.

And they are taken seriously here.

I want to preach this morning about what I have learned here at Hinde Street over eight years of ministry.

I came here in 2011 as a probationer.

On my best behaviour, because here in the Methodist Church you are not ordained until you've kept your nose clean for two years.

But it wasn't long before I learned that playing it safe wasn't the holy thing to do.

Being the people of God means taking risks.

Putting your head above the parapet.

Even if taking risks means making mistakes.

That's why we all need that divine wastebasket!

So – what have I learned by doing ministry for the first time here at Hinde Street?

I want to reflect on two key things, both of which are inspired by today's lectionary readings.

And the first thing I've learned is that you don't leave your **mind** at the church door.

As Giles reminded us last week, being a Mary rather than a Martha doesn't mean we sit back while others do all the work.

It means we make space to think carefully about what we do and say.

Because actions – and words – have consequences.

It doesn't mean we never do or say anything risky in case things go wrong.

Of course they will.

There are always consequences to our decisions.

Often ones we could never predict.

But it means that we engage with all our heart and soul and mind and strength with the issues of our faith.

And of our world.

I think it's courageous of the compilers of our scriptural heritage to include the story we heard from the book of Genesis.

In it, Abraham argues with God.

God plans to destroy the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah, if they are as sinful as they appear to be.

He sends off some mystery shoppers to see what the places are really like.

Abraham, meanwhile, begins a kind of Dutch Auction with God.

Will you really destroy these cities if there are fifty righteous people?

What about forty-five?

Forty

Thirty?

Shall not the judge of all the earth do what is just?

What's going on in this story?

Is Abraham really teaching God how to be God?

Is God testing Abraham to see just how empathetic he really is?

Especially whether he has compassion for those outside his own community of faith?

This – of course – will become one of the key subversive themes of the Hebrew Scriptures.

Or – and this is perhaps even more interesting – is the writer of this story arguing with his own assumptions about a God of wrath and punishment?

Challenging his own expectations?

Taking the risk of asking questions about the very tradition within which he is writing?

Of course, we don't know for certain – because all we have is the words within the tradition.

But either way, we are introduced to a God who invites us to ponder questions of justice and ethics.

A God who wants us to argue back.

A God who welcomes debate with his creation.

A God who wants to work in partnership with humanity.

A God who is willing to sit with the divine 'if' while the way forward is explored.

A God who takes seriously what humans think and say, and invites them to contribute to the shaping of the future.

So whatever we think of the Brexit debate, whatever we think of the new prime minister and his cabinet appointments, whatever we think of the state of politics in our own country and in the world, we Christians cannot simply step aside.

God wants us to wrestle with the issues.

God wants us to care.

And to care not just for the good guys, but for the bad guys too.

Abraham is not claiming that the citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah are innocent.

We see in chapter 19 just how aggressive and abusive they can be.

God wants us to take a risk and get involved, even when we seem to be choosing between two evils.

And I've learned here that we all share this responsibility – lay and ordained, male and female, old and young, those who read the Guardian and those who read the Mail.

I have learned so much from people who think very differently from me.

And I hope my thinking and preaching has challenged you to keep at this business of wrestling with God and with the world and with each other.

Of course, we will sometimes make mistakes.

But that's OK.

We need to cut each other some slack.

We need to let go of the need to be right all the time.

We need to keep on with the conversation.

✠ And so I'm coming down from this place of being right...

From the low pulpit

The other thing I've learned, that I want to reflect on this morning, is the importance of **prayer**.

It's kind of the opposite of the life of the mind.

And it's something I've learned almost despite the culture of Hinde Street.

Oh I know that we do public prayer very well.

We do worship beautifully here at the 11am service.

In this place I have learned to love the great Wesley hymns, sung with our fabulous organ, in four-part harmony.

I've learned to inhabit the structures of the Methodist Worship Book liturgies.

I've learned to celebrate the profoundly glorious language of the 1936 Communion service, which we use every Sunday at 10am.

I've learned to revel in the creativity and the mutuality of the evening services.

But I do wonder about our personal prayer lives.

I do wonder about how comfortable we are with spending time alone, in silence, with our God.

I may have got this wrong – and if I have misunderstood, I'm truly sorry – but I wonder whether most of us are just a bit embarrassed by all this emphasis on prayer. Spirituality.

An encounter with the almighty.

We're very left brain here at Hinde Street.
I don't imagine any of you disagree with everything I said from up there.
About political engagement.
About wrestling with difficult ethical decisions.
About an intellectual critique of the text of the Bible.

But the mysterious world of the right brain – that's just a bit odd.
A bit touchy-feely.

That meditation group on Tuesday lunchtimes: well it's great to have a mission to our local community, to the twelve-step groups, but silence isn't really my kind of thing.
What's the point of it?

When I get out my box of objects and invite you to choose something that represents God to you, I know there's often a bit of a race to the back of the room.
I know that many of you think it's silly.
Games for children.
And I wonder whether you really think it's beneath you?
Or whether you're well defended against the vulnerability of sharing what you really believe about God?
About life?
About your own, hidden self?

Over the last eight years there have been some wonderful conversations.
Conversations not just about the outer world and it's political arguments, but about the inner life of the heart.
Conversations with those who've come along to the Being a Methodist group.
The Seasons of my Soul group.
The ten minutes at the end of those lunchtime meditation sessions.

And there have been some wonderful times of prayer.
Advent reflections in the quiet space at the front of the church.
Standing in silence in front of the Holy Week art works.
Compline during Holy Week.
Proclaiming the Exsultet in Manchester Square Gardens on Easter morning.

When we've taken the risk of letting our guard down with each other, we've got to a holy place together.

In today's reading from Luke's gospel, the disciples ask Jesus to teach them how to pray.
And they ask him this, because they've seen him doing it.
They've seen how important it is for this traveling preacher to find quiet space with God.
I imagine they've seen the look on his face when he comes back to his friends, and to the challenges of his itinerant ministry.
I guess they're thinking – *I want some of that.*

Jesus offers them some words.

Not because a formula for prayer is what they need.

But because within that framework is something very important.

A focus on God:

- Hallowed be *YOUR* name
- *YOUR* kingdom come

And a focus on each other.

A sense that we are all in this together.

Have you noticed how the petitions in the Lord's prayer are plural?

Our daily bread...

Our sins...

Our times of trial...

What I have learned about prayer in my eight years at Hinde Street is that I can't manage without it.

I can't do this ministry business unless I begin my day with God.

Like Jesus, I have a certain place – for me it's the big red chair in the corner of my study.

The moment I relax into it, I know that God is waiting for me.

And I don't need a formula.

I just need to be present.

Which is not as simple as it sounds.

But I have also learned about the precious web of prayer that binds us all together.

In the parable that Jesus tells, someone goes to wake a neighbour in the middle of the night because a friend has arrived, and needs bread.

That urge to be there for the visiting friend...

That need to do something – anything – to provide what is needed...

As I have grown older I have learned that, much as I would love to, I cannot fix things for others.

Or for myself.

We have to learn to live with the stuff that life throws at us.

Prayer is not a magic wand that cures illness, lifts depression, mends broken relationships.

If only.

Prayer is being alongside people who are in dark places.

Holding them in the light of God's love.

Sharing the journey.

One of the really holy experiences of my ministry here has been my regular morning prayer for you.

For the people I have met up with.

Had conversations with.

Sat in committees with.

Now you may be sitting there thinking – *of course*.

Why is she trying to teach her grandmother to suck eggs.

We pray for each other all the time.

I'm sure – absolutely sure – that that's true.

But do you tell each other about your ministry of prayer?

I've learned that when I tell someone that I will pray for them, that I'll light a candle for them tomorrow morning, that I will hold them in the light every day while this time of trial goes on, something quite special happens.

When I was a student minister, I spent a month in Wimborne with the superintendent of the circuit, shadowing her work, observing what ministry looked like.

It was a difficult month – I had been going to South Africa on a theological college exchange trip.

But then my father was diagnosed with incurable liver cancer, and given just a few months to live.

I couldn't be on the other side of the world that summer.

So I went to Wimborne, where I could spend my day off each week with my parents, just half an hour away.

During that placement month, my father died.

When I returned to Wimborne, after his funeral, to complete my placement, I stayed with Judy, the widow of a Baptist minister, who worshipped at Wimborne Methodist Church.

Her care and support and kindness was just what I needed.

And she told me she would pray for me.

And she did.

And she kept on doing it.

Even now, though Judy is not at all well herself, she sends me emails at key times reminding me that she is praying for me.

She sent one last week, knowing that I was coming to the end of my time here at Hinde Street.

Knowing that Judy remembers me, and prays for me, is an important thread in that web of Connexion.

I wonder whether we might overcome our embarrassment at talking about such things, and tell our friends in Hinde Street that we hold each other in prayer.

We might perhaps share a conversation about our own experience of praying – and being prayed for.

What does it feel like when we are in the flow?

How do we cope when prayer feels dry and empty?

(We all have those times.)

What does it mean to us to know that our friends are praying for us?

Not for a particular outcome, a magic wish.

But for bread for the journey.

The energy we need to get through today.

What does it mean to know that we are part of a loving, praying community?

When I move to my new appointment, I shan't stop praying for you.

And I hope that you will continue to pray for me.

I need it.

At the font

And so, as I leave, I would like to offer you my blessing.

Sprinkling with water...

May you be people who wrestle with meaning, with politics, with ethical decisions.
People who use your minds to the glory of God.

May you be people of prayer.
People who make time to encounter God herself.
People who hold each other in a web of prayer.
And tell each other that this is what you do.

May you be people who are willing to let your guard down.
To talk about the life of faith.
To admit to your own doubts and questions.
And sit with the doubts and questions of others.
Not try to tell them the answer.

And may you be people who are willing to take risks.
And even make mistakes.
And may you be kind to each other when things go wrong.
As they will.

And may God's wastebasket always be there for your own slip-ups.
And mine.

Amen.