

## **Hinde Street Methodist Church**

Sunday 27 October 2019 11.00am

Rev Peter Cornick

### **So what's the story?**

I was at a Sikh wedding. This was back in the late 80s when I was a student. I was taking part in a project called 'Summer in Southall.' Students like me, who had very little exposure to people of other faiths, could listen, talk, work and eat with, people who had different cultural, religious and social backgrounds. In the home of a very hospitable Muslim family, I ate my first ever curry!!

So, I was at this Sikh wedding; me, and about half a dozen other students. It was amazing – the ceremony, the music, the colour – but really, the privilege of being there as a guest, at an important cultural and religious occasion. I've never forgotten it.

I only discovered a few weeks ago, when I met up with the minister who arranged the whole Southall project, that the bridegroom had turned to his bride and said, 'who are those people – are they on your side?' The Bride had replied: 'I thought they were on your side'!

The story of that Sikh couple's wedding which I gate-crashed; the meal with that Muslim family, all connect with my story. In fact, the whole experience of that summer, sparked an interest for me in working with people of other faiths than my own.

So, why did I meet up, after all these years, with the minister, who ran the Southall project – his name is John Parry? Well, in the summer, I was invited, as a Christian minister, to speak at a Muslim centre in Crawford Place, about my story of working with a Muslim community in Hampshire. And who should be speaking about his lifetime's work and research on people of different faiths – but John.

Our stories, separated by several decades, connected again, as we told stories of faiths, working together.

So, what's the story?

Not just, what is the story I've told, but what is the story doing and why?

Clive Marsh and Barbara Glasson have written a book called, *So What's the Story*. This week, I was listening to their seminars based on the book.

They ask first:

**1. Who is telling the story – who to and why?**

- a. Well, I was telling the story – because it is my story. It all happened to me.
- b. But they make the point, that stories need other people. Other people for the subject of the story to relate to. In my case, a Sikh couple, a Muslim family and a URC minister.
- c. Why tell the story? Now – today?
  - i. In this act of worship, I wanted my hearers – you – to understand
    1. This story has shaped my life – it is thirty years old – and also last summer. So it's important to me.
    2. It is no accident that I tell a story, which whilst I didn't mention Hinde Street, arises because I worshipped here as a student; the group was largely made up of students from Hinde Street.
    3. I wanted you to hear the impact other people have on our own story – the connections that are made.
    4. And in telling a personal story, I wanted to encourage and enable my hearers, to tell their stories.

**2. Secondly, Marsh and Glasson ask, is this story a faith story? And does every faith story have to explicitly mention God, or is God perhaps, implicit?**

- a. This story is a faith story. It charts some of my personal journey of faith. But, notice how I didn't mention God once – no mention of Jesus. Marsh and Glasson would say, God was implicit in what I said. If you hear the story, in my personal growth, there was the growth of faith in God through a Christian lens.
- b. Did you notice a few more implicit faith stories within my story? What's the story of my work with a Muslim community in Hampshire? What's the story of that URC minister who I met, thirty years after the event? What happened to the stories of the other students who were with me at the wedding. They belong to

the much larger story of God which emanates from one place in one summer.

**3. Thirdly, they examined the Biblical stories – and the differing interpretations. What is – or can there be – Biblical truth?**

- a. Clive Marsh talked about connecting our stories to consistent themes in the Bible. Jesus often uses the faith, devotion and hospitality of someone on the edge of society, or a foreigner, to challenge the assumptions of the so-called righteous religious people – a Samaritan; a woman; a tax collector. So, in my personal story, I was challenged and moved by the faith, devotion, and hospitality, of people beyond my experience. The view of God I had received, the exclusivity of Christ, no longer made sense. Connecting my story to the Bible, raises some hard questions.

Which brings me to the story Jesus told – about a Pharisee and a tax collector, who both go to the temple to pray. A short scene, but one which gives a great picture – I imagine a pompous religious leader in fine clothes, bragging about how much he fasts, and how much he gives. God is quite clearly, to him, on his side –

God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector.

The tax collector is standing, far off. He can't even look to God. He is aware of his sin.

“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

**4. Who is telling the story – to who and why?**

- a. When you hear a parable, or any story really, listen to the first line, because in it, is the often the reason for the story.

He – Jesus – also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt:

- b. Jesus is the storyteller, and he is clearly concerned, that some in his audience are self-righteous – think they've made it with God, and disregard others. Jesus wants to challenge their behaviour. Instead of telling them off, he tells a story.

- c. To raise up the hated tax collector, is crucial in the story telling because of the audience. The tax collector, seen as a sinner not so much because he might cheat – as in the famous Zacchaeus – but because he colluded with the occupying Romans.
- d. Who tells the story, to who and why, is critically important.

**5. Is it a faith story – is God explicit or implicit?**

- a. Both men are praying to God, so it is a story set in the context of faith. But it's about so much more.
- b. It's a story about who God will bless – forgive – love.
- c. The Pharisee, thinks God will bless him because of what he has done – how much he has paid. The Pharisee thinks he has avoided sin so deserves special treatment. He has elevated himself above, thieves, rogues, adulterers and tax collectors. But he has walked straight into the sin of pride. He has assumed, like so many in history, that God is on his side.
- d. The tax collector has confessed, assumed he would be beyond God's reach.
- e. He is the one, 'justified' – cleared, forgiven, free. Because he has come to God with nothing at all.
- f. The story is about explicitly praying to God; but implicitly, God's grace extending to the lost A consistent theme in Luke.
- g. The meaning of the story, is, salvation is not bought or deserved; salvation is gifted to those who recognise their need.

**6. How does the story Jesus tells, connect to the story of the listeners – who of course, are also us?**

- a. In the light of Jesus' story, those who believed they were righteous, have to reassess their faith. If tax collectors are welcomed, then who else? Who is this God?
- b. And us – me? If I, for one moment, ever thought that as a white, Christian, privileged, student, I was exalted, gate-crashing a Sikh wedding humbled me.