

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 9 February 2020 11.00am

David Thompson

Fifth Sunday Epiphany

Isaiah 58:3-9a

Matthew 5:13-40

Psalm 112: 1-9

When I was in primary school, my Dad used to walk my brother and me to school. He would have a habit of turning a 15 minute walk into a twenty five minute walk because he insisted on saying "good morning" to every single person we met and sometimes this good morning would turn into a full blown conversation. Some would look at him like he was maniac and continue walking with their head down, others would nervously smile and walk on but others would stop and sometimes a "good morning" turned into a full blown conversation. I asked him once why he carried out this habit that used to delay the walk we did every morning. However, I might add that we were never late. He answered that for that person they may be the only person they get to talk to that day so for that reason it was worth it.

This morning's two lectionary readings reflect on our calling of what it is to be a servant of God. They warn of how our faith can be often dressed up (in the case of Isaiah) and that sometimes there will be times when we lose our way. However, at the same time they offer us a renewed calling to be the light when all else seems dark as disciples of Christ.

In the reading from Isaiah, we find ourselves in the post exilic community of Israel as it again battles with its faith in God. In the ordinances (v2) of the Sabbath and fasting, the poet prophet questions God: *"Why do we fast, and you do not see? Why humble ourselves and you do not notice"* In other words, there is no reward in the rituals that they take part in.

There is a clear answer given by the poet prophet - that religion at this time is being used to avoid the reality of God. Believers are left autonomous except for with God, when in fact the true purpose of faithfulness is to enter into relationship with the neighbour and challenge injustice.

V6-"Is not this the fast that I choose to loose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke (power arrangements in economic and political matters in the Bible usually denying one dignity and joy), to let the oppressed free, and to break every yoke."

It is easy to interpret this as meaning that rituals or ordinances are not needed in discipleship, only action. But this is not the case. John Wesley wrote in Sermon 16: "Christ has ordained certain outward means for conveying his grace into the souls (of the people)". Traditionally these are the two sacraments which Methodist practise. Baptism and Communion. Baptism is the entry into God's grace whether it be an infant or an adult and communion is the sign of God's unlimited grace. These inspire us then to go out into the world, enter into a relationship with our neighbour and "loose the bonds injustice" what

Wesley calls social holiness. This is our call as servants of God. The ritual and the action are intertwined.

This call of discipleship is further developed by Matthew in our second reading which is of course after the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount. The “Salt” and “Light” are references to what it is to be a disciple of Christ.

Every theology student can remember the first time they read Dietrich Bonhoeffer. For my wife Sarah it was as a sixth former and for me who was too busy reading Tillich to notice him at university, it was 2018 when I was researching to write a booklet for the new A-Level course which covers Bonhoeffer in one of its modules. It changed my understanding of discipleship.

Please forgive me then for turning to Bonhoeffer’s exegesis of this passage. Bonhoeffer makes it clear that in referencing the “salt” it makes this an earthly calling of discipleship rather than a heavenly one which the Beatitudes may be referring to. The use of salt is in reference to added value. One adds salt to flavour food and in Jesus’ time to fertilise the ground. Therefore, discipleship is about changing the world for the better by challenging the injustice around us, lifting up those who are suffering and being the words of wisdom for those whose tomorrow is all that bit difficult.

But what if our salt loses its saltiness as is possible? Discipleship will go through such times as these. There will be times when we feel we can no longer help the church as we once did, be the words of wisdom to the loved one in distress and even when we will doubt our discipleship all together. However, there can be renewal and it is in the “Light” found in Jesus that we can be the “Light” for others-our neighbour. “Let your light shine before others” says Jesus.

Bonhoeffer calls this “the visible community” as it is our calling to be just as a light is visible from afar and visible to others in the good works that we do when we encounter the suffering which is symbolised in the cross. When one notices this, then they will see the “light of the resurrection” according to Bonhoeffer. Therefore, there is renewal to be found in us but also the other we attend to.

It will be easy for me to illustrate this in action with the life of Bonhoeffer but I am sure you are familiar of the story of the Christian martyr. However, if you are not I advise you to read the article in the recent Cross-links magazine by Cecelia.

Instead I will end with another story, of a heroic woman from the time of Bonhoeffer and indeed who was a “light” to those in darkness and in being with the oppressed and saving lives when so many Christians did nothing she was the “salt” too.

Her name was Jane Haining and she was born in 1897 in Dunscore, Dumfries. She was born to a Presbyterian family and from an early age had a love of books and her life was centred around chapel as it was for so many Presbyterians and indeed Methodists at that time. In 1932 she was inspired to move to Budapest to take up a post at a school for destitute Jews ran by the Scottish Church there. She threw herself into the work straight away and soon

became a mother to the many girls that resided there, feeding, teaching and playing with them daily.

When war broke out in 1939, the Church back home in Scotland begged Jane to return but she repeatedly refused, once responding "If these girls need me in times of sunshine"... "how much more do they need me in these times of darkness." During these dark years of the war, Jane would be a constant comfort to the girls, often cutting the leather off her own shoes in order to keep the girl's feet warm in winter and even managing to smuggle girls from the school out on forged papers.

When the Germans invaded in 1944, Jane was arrested for "listening to the BBC, aiding enemy soldiers and working among Jews." When she was questioned by the Gestapo, she admitted all the charges except political activity saying that she had only sought to do what she felt God was calling her to do: to love the girls in her care. She was arrested and is said to have turned to the girls "I'll be back by lunch." She died in Auschwitz on 17th July 1944.

The Psalmist writes that "righteousness endures forever" and this is the case for Jane, for in Dunscore, one will find a small memorial to her and at Yad Vashem, Jerusalem she is "Righteous among the Nations". She was indeed a "light."

After we planned this morning's service a few weeks ago, I got on for the tube home at Bond St which was unusually busy. For the woman in front of me this unusually busy carriage was too much for her and she stepped off to be with her friend who had been waiting on the platform with me not too far away. She happened to be I suspect British Somalian. The person behind me objected to her sudden change of mind and opened a torrent of racial abuse which lasted until the next stop. I and another woman were the only people to speak up out of a packed carriage and when I say something, I cannot see it being enough to be reflective of the readings today.

The silent carriage and my pathetic attempt at challenging the racist abuse frustrated me for the rest of the journey home as at that point I may have failed to be enough "light" when darkness ensued.

We may feel too this morning that our discipleship is at a wane, we are no longer the salt we were and as the church continues to decline in numbers it is hard to see it as the "light" it used to be. However, one should never underestimate the power of discipleship- for when one serves the homeless in the night shelter, he listens to the distressed when all they need to do is hear a reassuring voice and speaks out against injustice-one is mirroring the light of the resurrection.

It has taken me many years to realise the worth of the words of my father and why he would turn that 15 minute walk into a 25 minute walk every single morning but I think I understand now. Carrying out the call of discipleship can sometimes be the smallest of gestures but for the neighbour it can be life changing. And that is what it means to be the light of the world. Amen