

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 22nd March 2020

Rev Peter Cornick

'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' John 9: 5

What have I noticed this week?

That humans need to be in contact with each other. A few days of not being in the office, and it is good to see colleagues on a screen. The staff meetings and organised social gatherings – all online – seem more relevant now than the slightly forced bon-homie of Christmas get togethers a few short months ago. I hope the same is true for our gathering this morning.

I've noticed trying to make a decision in a business meeting, on a computer screen, is much harder – we rely on body language; gauging the temperature of the room.

When there have been tough decisions to be made, colleagues and volunteers have rallied together, supporting one another. Even if the decisions have been unpopular at the time. I never expected to close a church with immediate effect.

There has been a tremendous amount of listening to advice; seeking advice. I am glad I work in an environment where I am not on my own. If we've made right or wrong decisions, and this on-line worship is one of them, the decisions have been made collectively.

I've noticed daffodils whilst exercising in Regent's Park and a goldfinch was in the tree on the pavement outside my window as I wrote this. We humans look for any sign of hope as Noah continued to look for a dove with a leaf. Perhaps we need to now notice what is outside of our own window.

I've noticed people ringing one another to check someone is OK – and a note through my door from a London neighbour offering to collect food or prescriptions for anyone self-isolating – a crisis generating neighbourhood spirit!

I had a long conversation with a woman in Tesco who was anxious – a complete stranger – this was when the panic buying had only just started.

I talked at Wednesday Club, which took place at distance on the church steps, with a homeless man. All the avenues he uses for food, toilets, company, are being gradually shut down.

I had a good conversation with someone from an anonymous group who was waiting on the church steps in case anyone turned up for their meeting.

Would I have had those conversations in ordinary times? Perhaps we all needed the social interaction even if keeping a social distance. I've noticed all these things – and whilst the content of conversations has been difficult, I've deliberately highlighted those occurrences which are positive.

And in the human interaction, conversation, confusion and uncertainty, God has been there.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff -
they comfort me.

On reading that Psalm midweek, in preparation for today, it struck me that in the darkest times, when there is a crisis, we lean on others – the rod and staff of stranger and friend become essential. They are a

comfort. Perhaps in ordinary time, we are too busy; we're in different places.

And the rod and staff of God? Has God been a comfort in this trying week – even though we walk through the darkest valley?

For many, ill with the virus, or bereaved, the valley will have been a whole lot darker than my efforts to run a church. The comfort will have come from a nurse, a care worker, a neighbour, a friend – maybe even a Class Leader.

We at Hinde Street have a particular interest in the WLM care projects. The Haven, for example, houses men with chronic alcoholism. Their immune systems will already be weak after years of addiction. We have had to scale down operations in other projects to prioritise those residents at greatest risk as staff reduce through self-isolation. Your prayers for the staff at The Haven, and the other WLM projects adapting to new conditions of working will be welcome.

Perhaps we notice God, in the nurse, care worker, neighbour, friend or Class Leader.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff -
they comfort me.

Perhaps the crisis helps us to notice God; to notice light in the darkness:
he restores my soul.
He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

And light in the darkness leads us to the story of the man born blind. A very long narrative in John's gospel.

This is one of those stories which needs a number of amber warning lights before we even start – but in these bewildering times, they are perhaps worth repeating.

The gospel writer – some 2000 years ago – uses a man who is partially sighted as the key witness for someone in need of change or healing. The metaphor of coming from darkness to light is a legitimate and powerful one. But if this were written today, we would not be employing a partially sighted man to reinforce our metaphor. So, I am uncomfortable already.

Attitudes to disability have changed to some degree. I remember being in the Olympic Stadium for a 400m race by partially sighted runners. The witness of those runners that night was profoundly hopeful. With their running, their lives are far from dark, but filled with light. But I'm also uncomfortable with way in which the man born blind, becomes something of an object for a theological debate by the disciples.

But here is the really disturbing bit.

'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' In other words, what has he – or his ancestors – done wrong that this misfortune should be visited upon him.

I will be amazed if someone on the internet hasn't asked, what have we, as human beings, done wrong to have this virus inflicted on us. And they might possibly add – by God. It is a version of the question, why do we suffer?

Jesus quickly dismisses the idea that the man or his parents have done anything wrong at all. This is no punishment or penance. And you might think what Jesus says next, rather odd. He says of the man; 'he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him.' Really? This is uncomfortable.

Or perhaps Jesus is saying something else. Commenting on the mystery of the universe – saying God’s universe is right before our eyes. We don’t know why this man is born blind. We don’t know why some viruses mutate and others do not. Nor why some spread, and others do not. And nor do the scientists at the moment. As Jesus reflects on a mystery of his day, we reflect on a mystery of ours. Our vulnerability as humans, a species who need social contact and conversation, has been exposed. A species who, we discover, are not as invincible as we thought even last week. We have been starkly reminded of our connectedness, not only to each other, but to other lifeforms. There is infinitely more to discover in this vastly complex creation.

A poster, displayed in the window of Methodist Church House, now shut, says, the Methodist people are praying for the world at this time. So, in our prayers, we must believe that, best of all, God is with us. There is hope.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley
I fear no evil;
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff -
they comfort me.

Churches together in England have invited Christians to light a candle in their window tonight, at 7 o’clock. A sign of hope for the world. A sign that Christians are praying for the world. A sign that we believe God is with us in this trouble. So perhaps we could all light a candle tonight at 7 – taking care to avoid curtains and combustibles – Italians sang to each other from their windows; we could bring light to the world. And we are being invited – within the bounds of government restrictions – to take action caring for our neighbours who are in need.

Because this story of the man born blind is, essentially about Christ bringing light to chaos. However difficult we find the imagery today, the gospel writer felt that the man was vulnerable and weak and needed healing. And in the story, it is Jesus who heals him. Who is the bringer

of light. More, the man is questioned by the crowd. Is it him who met this Jesus? I am the man, he replies. 'I am'. That ancient Hebrew name of God. 'I am'. 'I am' the man. I have been filled with the light and life of God. I am made in the image of God. And I have been restored from whatever it is that disturbs me, by God.

Our frail humanity, this vulnerable interconnected organic body, is made in the image of God. But, the message of the story is, in meeting with Jesus, light floods into us. We are filled with hope. Because in our greatest need, God sent his Son into the world, that we might realise, God is with us. 'One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' (9:25)

'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

It is Mothering Sunday. Perhaps mothers, of all people, know the frailty of human life – its miracle. Whether they have physically carried a baby for nine months, or fostered tens of children, have lost children, desired children. Frailty and miracle sit beside each other. And might we pray for parents and teachers, trying to find words to explain social distancing and viruses.

The story of the man born blind progresses to a kind of trial. Again, an amber light needs to be flashed here. It is easy to jump to the conclusion that this passage is suggesting Jesus right, Jews wrong. It would be to fundamentally misunderstand what is going on. Jesus has healed this man. The Jewish leaders are, as I suspect we might be, trying to work out if this rabbi is genuine or not. If, as Jewish thinkers have done down the centuries, Jesus is re-interpreting the meaning of the Law, what kind of threat did that present to the whole faith. The Pharisees amongst others felt under threat for their whole way of life. How to deal with what was fast becoming a popular breakaway group. It has happened many times in Christian history since – which is why we are the people called Methodists. And in the gospel writer's community, the separation between the Jewish faith and the Christian, was a hundred years down the road. So, the story might well represent

the religious tensions in John's hometown. It might well pre-figure the trial of Jesus himself.

What you need to remember is, Jesus was trying to offer a way of discovering God anew, to his community. Offering light. And some didn't like change. Where have we heard that before?

Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' (9:39)

Leaving the specific historical context, this story speaks of a world overcome with fear and suspicion, of blame and prejudice. It would be easy for us to fall into that mind set at the moment. We know that the Chinese community has been scapegoated. We pray for our sister church at Kings Cross whose congregation are particularly fearful because of the reaction from some people towards them. We also remember that many of them work in the restaurant trade which started to be affected long before this week's closures.

This story again, reminds us, that in a time of social chaos and fear, Christ brings light. God is with us. The man is transformed and believes.

He is filled with light. Filled with God.

'As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.'

And Jesus is in the world – offering light – look around at the people who are his followers – you can see them all here. Isolated by distance. United in prayer and the community of his fellowship.

Friends, the story, for all its twists and turns, is quite simple. In a world of uncertainty where we are merely creatures, in a world of suffering, in a world of social chaos and fear, believe in Jesus. He brings hope. He is light. For he is living and resurrected evidence, that, even in the darkest moments, God is with us, his rod and staff, they comfort us.