

Hinde Street Methodist Church

Sunday 10th May 2020 11.00am

Rev Andrew Letby

We are shaped by experiences ... personal and communal

This morning my thoughts are shaped by two personal experiences

The first is that 30 years ago this weekend, at the midpoint of my training for ordination – I arrived in London to begin my long practical placement, at no lesser place than Hinde Street Methodist Church. Over a couple of months, I got to know the church community, led worship and learned of the work of the West London Mission including substantial time in one of the projects.

Much of my subsequent ministry has been shaped by the experience of those weeks in 1990 the learning from which has often provided me with a reference point.

I didn't realise the anniversary until after I had asked if Hackney and Stoke Newington could join you this morning and accepted Peter's invitation to preach,
So for more reasons than I expected, thank you for welcoming me and us – in this east meets west (London that is) opportunity for worship.

In these complex times when, as churches we are rapidly developing different ways of gathering and worshipping I asked if people from Hackney and Stoke Newington churches could join the Love Feast this morning as a practical example of the opportunities to explore new ways that have blossomed around us.

As a friend noted during the week – 'I now seem to be going 7 or 8 different churches, in different forms every Sunday'. –

So, the theme which is woven through my thoughts today:

Many doors have closed – but others have opened.

Whatever period of our lives we choose we can identify so much which has shaped us, personally and the world in which we live:

So this year also sees my son's 30th birthday – Ben was born 2 days after Margaret Thatcher stepped down as Prime Minister in the months after my placement.

That, and many other events have changed the context in which we live:

two Gulf wars, the opening of the Channel Tunnel, the death of a Princess.

The Good Friday agreement and formation of devolved governments in Wales and Scotland.

9/11 and 7/7 became more than random numbers or dates – describing events which are etched in our consciousness.

Thirty years ago, we didn't know Harry Potter and we could hardly of imagined an iPhone.

More poignantly for this moment, we couldn't conceive of the consequences lying in wait from Foot and Mouth, Sars or Ebola.

These moments in history came to us with new challenge and opportunity – and in significant ways led to things being different. They could not be predicted; but had a profound effect on the world in which we live.

And now we live through times which more than ever exhaust our vocabulary of adjectives as we seek to convey our sense of what is going on – unprecedented, uncharted, strange, confusing...

Our world has changed and is changing -

Many doors have closed – but others have opened

So, to my second experience – which relates to the Gospel reading. It was the text behind my first ever sermon as I progressed through the early stages of becoming a Methodist Local Preacher. I can't recall the date for that one, but I do know it was over 40 years ago (I was but a child!)

The go to bible translation then, was the Revised Standard Version – in which Jesus self-description is rendered as the Door of the sheepfold – we are perhaps more familiar with the translation as Gate.

I asked this morning we might go with a version which used 'door' – arguably a better description of the rough wooden barrier which would have protected a first century middle eastern sheepfold in any case!

The 'door' image serves a number of purposes to do with safety and security – both the lack of them and the possibility of finding them.

The impact of the imagery here is to encourage and embolden the followers of Jesus. There is no threat of division between good sheep and bad sheep, no suggestion that thieves and bandits will succeed in destroying part of the flock.

Instead, the sheep are the shepherd's 'own'. Their familiarity with the shepherd, who is also the door, guarantees them their safety and security. Notably the door allows them *to go out and come in* knowing that they will be safe. (The language is of course reminiscent of Psalm 23, the words of which we will sing in a few minutes)

On the Sunday after Easter the Gospel reading recounted the story of Thomas – and the struggle he had to believe what his friends had told him.

The thing that struck me most in that reading was the context – the disciples were hidden behind locked doors – fearing for their safety.

That held a powerful resonance with the situation in which we find ourselves currently, as the word 'lockdown' has become the theme of every news bulletin and an everyday reality for so many people.

But Jesus' presence with his friends behind that locked door was the sign of a new beginning.

What happened in the moment Jesus came into their midst not only had a profound effect on Thomas who was finally able to declare his belief – it was a key moment in giving the whole group the confidence to venture out and declare the good news in the world around them.

In the realm of God, a closed or locked door is no barrier to our experiencing God's love and grace, and does not confine our vision to our immediate surroundings.

God has not given up on us or limited our horizons and we are called to love, serve and support one another as much, if not more, than ever.

How we do it may be radically different at the moment – but every phone call, text message, video or even letter is a reminder that though our physical horizons may be severely limited at the moment – the love we experience through Jesus with us and beyond us, is not.

Many doors have closed – but others have opened

The challenge to be God's faithful people in new ways will inevitably have a lasting effect on us (just as all our experiences have).

Just as we have lived through dramatic times before without knowing what the long term consequences would be – we do so again. But we should equally be alert to the lessons we can draw from our current experience.

Much has been made of the present situation being of the same magnitude as the second world war. When we look back – we see that many of the changes in our society which came from that, not least the formation of the NHS – didn't just happen as peace came – discussion, planning, hoping had begun even while conflict was still raging. It was understood that something new had to be born out of the fear and death.

Surely the same must be true now – if we simply try to recreate what was – we are missing an opportunity. That will be true equally in the world around us *and* as we learn lessons for the communities we call church.

Discussions about improved air quality, remote working, and making more room for cycling and walking will be vital.

And, this time is highlighting many basic inconsistencies and inequalities in our society.

A theme of several conversations I have been involved in this week involving Faith reps, Hackney Council and voluntary groups has been that of digital exclusion across parts of our society. *Not to be able to or confident in accessing the internet has become far more urgent than we might have thought.* (p)

And for our fellowship and outreach? – we may have hit upon new opportunities to be inclusive and radical communities as we work in new ways and have gained insights from communities different from our own – simply because they have become more visible.

The description of the earliest fellowship we shared from Acts can sometimes feel like a picture of an idealised world, that we know if it ever existed, it only did so for a very short time – before argument, self interest and intransigence set in.

But, it does serve to remind us that key to who we are as Christian disciples is how we relate to one another, care for our community and ourselves. As in a moment we 'feast' together we are reminded that fellowship round the table, in the giving and receiving of food, we touch the very core of God's love for us.

Many doors have closed – but others have opened

Because we believe in a God whose grace is new and real each and every day.

Amen