

## Hinde Street 15 November 11am sermon

I can be absolutely certain that this week's readings are relevant to everyone. The reading from Samuel is about what happens when someone gets provoked, while the reading from Hebrews tells us to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds. Hannah's words we read together are pretty provocative, as are Jesus' – we can't even take the strong walls around us for granted.

I'm confident everyone in this room has been provoked at some point in their life. And that you have all provoked people. In just this week:

On Monday, a man on a bus talking loudly to himself tried to pester me into joining in with his conversation.

On Wednesday I was irritated by my boss who just went the wrong way about asking me to do something, and I tried to incite him into showing a bit of empathy.

On Thursday I felt so many emotions all at once as I listened to the lunch time news that followed the Dhnie family as they try to make it to the EU after fleeing Syria and spending two years in a refugee camp in Syria. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p037lrj7>

On Friday I read about a judge who, while passing sentence for a horrific murder commended the family of the victim for how they had handled themselves during the trial and found himself in tears <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-34812317>

Over dinner last night I was asked what I would be preaching on. I replied "provocation" only to be told "that doesn't sound like it will be any good."

Just in a week all the elements of provocation: emotion and incitement, irritation and being pestered. Because it is something we all experience and all do, this is relevant to everyone. It is not reserved for a special category of prophet or teacher or preacher.

Therefore I'm going to look at three statements that will hopefully provoke us to see how this is relevant and important to our day to day lives:

1. Provocation can be holy, of God
2. We must be open to be provoked
3. When we provoke, we can be one of the signs of the times

### **Firstly, provocation can be holy**

Being provoked, by definition, isn't much fun. But Jesus' words in our gospel reading remind us why it is important. We live in a time of upheaval. Great buildings are thrown down. We hear of wars and rumours of wars, earthquakes and famine. This isn't how it should be. This should be the beginning of something else, different, better.

It's not surprising that we fail to read the signs. You might be expecting me to talk about the dangers of complacency here, but that's the wrong thing. The dictionary tells me complacency is about being too easily satisfied and disinclined to worry, but I'm sure we are mostly not that. Numb, overwhelmed or helpless might be better descriptions of why we so rarely all join together to create something new, different and better together.

It is not just feelings of being overwhelmed that can stop us doing the things we need to do. Research out this week shows that the more confident we are in being an expert on something the more close-minded we become. For us, this might be that we feel we are an old hand at being a Christian, or an activist or a good neighbour. So we stop being open to new information that would tell us how we can become even better. We don't see the signs of what these times need.

<http://digest.bps.org.uk/2015/10/feeling-like-youre-expert-can-make-you.html>

Therefore we need to be provoked out of it.

One of the first academics to study change identified a three stage process: unfreezing to enable change to take place, the change itself, and then refreezing to help keep it there. Since then it has been found to be much more complicated than that, but the idea of unfreezing is a good place to start. Provocation can be what breaks through everything that is holding things the way they currently are. Provocation can unfreeze it and make it possible for change to happen.

### **Secondly, we must be open to be provoked**

I've travelled on enough buses in London to spot the person who is trying to provoke me into joining his conversation and know that the best way of avoiding the irritation is to ignore it. On Monday I was therefore able to switch into blocking mode. I got my phone out and looked busy. When asked a direct question I gave an answer that closed down the possibilities of it becoming a conversation. Most importantly, I held my tongue even though I could think of 101 witty, clever replies to his persistent exclamations all the way from Lambeth North to Camberwell Green.

If, however, we approach all situations of provocation like that, and the pester loses its power, we are missing the signs of what should be accomplished.

We need to be open to God speaking to us through unlikely sources and in unlikely ways. "Tell us what will be the sign", the disciples ask. They and we have many clues. Unlikely women giving birth throughout the bible provoke unexpected things to happen, and are a portent of world changing events. The 'drunk' in the temple turns out to be more devout than the Priest. The least likely characters speak the most powerful words: God raises the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap. We should expect to look in the most unexpected places.

To see the signs, we need to know that our anger, frustration and irritation can be holy. Perhaps we need to reclaim the positive connotations in the idea of righteous indignation. Anger without guilt can be dangerous, but righteous indignation can also motivate us to change the injustices, pain and mistreatment that provoked it.

### **Thirdly, when we provoke, we can be one of the signs of the times**

In the examples of provocation from my week, I was careful to include an incident where I provoked someone. I know I could have stopped and not made my boss' life quite so difficult, but I just couldn't help myself. I was driven on by all the frustrations people in my team have expressed to me since he joined us. I just wanted him to acknowledge that we were tired, working hard and having a difficult week. I've thought long and hard about whether it was the right thing to do, whether it was more about making me feel better than challenging his view of what matters. Several people in the team who overheard have separately thanked me for saying it and he seemed a little more thoughtful for the rest of the week. But I'm not proud of persisting at irritating someone long after I'd made my point.

We've probably all provoked someone this week. Some of us provoke others just through existing and being who we are. We don't do things the way other people do things, and it forces them to think about what they have always taken for granted. We are in some way a little bit different to other people and it forces them to think about who they are. For example, a woman was convicted this week for a vicious verbal assault on another bus passenger. The bus passenger was attacked because she was Muslim, pregnant and not an English speaker.

As the poet Vanessa Kisuule writes in Identity Jenga:  
To the boy who has been known to kiss boys,  
and the girl who has been known to kiss girls,  
may your public caress of your lover's shoulder  
be an everyday gesture of affection  
not a wilful act of defiance.

<https://t.co/cfxl6ed43k>

While provocation can bring positive change until it gets to the point where difference is accepted and no one can remember what the fuss was about, it is not easy being someone who provokes others. Sometimes we just want to walk around unnoticed and do simple things like existing. The bus passenger told the court "Every time I go out, I'm afraid I might find myself in this situation, as something similar has happened on a bus on another occasion because I am Muslim".

Remembering that provocation can be holy can help us through these difficulties. It reminds us that there isn't something wrong with us. Being provocative can be as valuable as the prophet who is without honour in his own country. Blessed are the provocateurs, we can be one of those signs of the time.

## **Conclusion**

Provocation, then can be holy and of God. We therefore must be open to be provoked ourselves. When we provoke, we can be one of the signs of the times.

All this reminds us about what is at the heart of provocation. It should be aimed at bringing about love and good deeds. To bring about a time when all the strong, fixed things crumble to make way for something new.

Amen