

Sermon for Hinde Street Methodist Church
17th May 2015 10am

Psalm 1
John 17. 6-19

One of my favourite authors is a Jewish Rabbi called Chaim Potok. He was born and brought up in New York, but his roots are in Eastern Europe, and his family was among the many who fled to the United States to escape persecution. His novels are stories about the Jewish community, as it struggled to find a place in their new country, while Jews in Europe were being threatened by Nazis and communism. I love the way he writes about how the Orthodox Jewish community studies the Torah (the first five books of the bible). In one passage he describes the men meeting on the Sabbath morning to study. They sit at tables and debate the passage they are studying. Their arguments move back and forwards as someone quotes one authority and then another. Personal views and interpretations have to be justified. And the discussion goes on until all are satisfied that a good interpretation has been found. It was a revelation. I'd always imagined Orthodox Jews, like the orthodox in every religion, would know how each section of the law should be interpreted.

Today's psalm gives a similar impression. I've never found it helpful. It feels so black and white. The righteous seem holier than thou. And the wicked seem to be called wicked for no reason other than they don't do as the righteous do. But I've learnt it's not supposed to be read like this. It's not about what we must do or must not do. Its purpose is to help God's people live in ways that express their acceptance of God's love. And pondering, reflecting, meditating - even arguing vigorously - is one way of enabling us to do this. "Meditation" is the key word. The psalmist says of those who are happy, "*Their delight is in the law of the LORD, and they meditate on his law day and night.*" This meditation isn't academic debate. It's not about working out how to obey rules. It's a playful activity, in which the community that prays, serves and lives together, struggles to discover how God's law should be lived in each place and time. I like this picture of God's people, sharing study, using their experience of life, and enjoying the struggle of reflecting on God's word for today. And I'm helped in knowing what it means in practice by a talk Rowan Williams gave at a conference I went to a few years ago. His theme was how Christians might be one - the wider theme of chapter 17 of John's Gospel and he suggested 4 "pillars" - contemplative prayer, pilgrimage, festival and service. All contribute to building unity - the sort of unity Chaim Potok's novel tells of. And for me, they're concrete ways to meditate on God's word together, in today's world.

Today's Gospel is part of a prayer. Jesus prays that the community he is about to leave will be drawn more closely into the life of God. For its only when we're drawn into God's life though following Jesus and opening ourselves to the Spirit that we can become the community we're called to be. And Rowan Williams' 4 pillars help the Christian community to be drawn into the life of God, the Creator, Son and Spirit, together

The 1st pillar is contemplative prayer, the prayer in which we make space to hear God, by seeking silence in our minds and in our hearts. This prayer prepares us for engaging with the world, by enabling us to face the world, where the values of God's kingdom are questioned and challenged. So Williams says "*corporate contemplative prayer has to*

become the heartbeat of the community.” Contemplative prayer carries a mystery warning, ‘though, because it can leave us feeling insecure and vulnerable if we cannot cope with not having all the resources or answers we think we need. So Jesus prays that God will protect his disciples as we relate to the world.

The 2nd pillar is pilgrimage. And pilgrimage can help us to learn how to relate to God’s people and world. Every Tuesday in the summer, there is a pilgrimage around Iona, to the important sites. But more important is the encounters and the sharing that happen during the walk. Peter Millar wrote this about one encounter.

*At Columba’s Bay they met;
Two of Iona’s countless pilgrims.
He, a pastor from Zaire;
She, a broker in Detroit.
And battered by the autumn wind and rain
they shared their stories -
rooted in twentieth century realities,
yet both embedded
in a strange, life-giving brokenness.
The hidden stories -
of poverty and torture,
of cancer and loneliness,
interweaving stories,
mirroring our global connectedness.
And stories of faith;
of God’s unfolding in their lives
through ordinary days.
And suddenly it seemed
that for a moment on that distant shore
they glimpsed that basic truth -
that truly, we are one in Christ.*

Jesus’ disciples were pilgrims who shared their life together, travelling from village to town, as they accompanied Jesus on the journey to Jerusalem. When people walk and live together they become friends. We encourage and support each other, sharing the ups and downs, of the journey. So far Jesus’ presence had held them together, and so being concerned about what his absence might mean for the community, he promises that God’s Spirit will be with them.

The 3rd pillar is festival. As Jesus and his disciples lived and walked together, they attracted people to them. Not just because of what he said and did, but also I think, because people wanted to experience the joy Jesus and his disciples shared. It was the first thing I noticed about the Christian group I eventually joined when I was at university. Theirs was a joy that came from shared prayer and a shared life and a shared journey. But the joy Jesus gives is much more than happy smiles and warm hugs. His joy is the life-giving joy that comes from his word, his actions, his life and his death, words that frequently offended, and actions that were scrutinized with suspicion. So as Jesus approaches his death, he prays that this joy will continue.

Rowan Williams' 4th pillar is service, not service done to others, but service of each other. In L'Arche Communities people with disabilities live with the help of assistants. They've discovered that those called "disabled" and those called "helpers" are not receivers and givers, helper and helped, but because they're "differently abled", each gives and receives to and from the others. When this is our understanding of service, relationships are profoundly different. The community John's Gospel was written for was as distinctive as L'Arche communities in today's world. And the truth of their distinctiveness enabled them to serve the world better. In some ways, the church is a community like any other community, no more or no less, virtuous. Yet the church should be different, because we have been set apart by God, and called to live as a community of strangers who have become a family. In this we do not belong to the world, yet what we share here must affect the way we live in the world. So Jesus prays for us to be sanctified in this truth.

As we take share contemplative prayer, pilgrimage, festivals, and service, and reflect on what we learn through them with others, we're doing what psalm 1 encourages us to do. We're meditating on God's word. And as we meditate on God' word with others, we're engaged in the process of discovering God's truth that we are one, and are becoming, one. These 4 pillars open our hearts to each other and to God. And they help us discover we can dance together. And I really do mean dance. Later in the book where Chaim Potok describes the men of the Orthodox Jewish community studying the Torah together. He describes how they danced, after one particularly vigorously disputed passage, has been settled and agreed. The tables are cleared away, and the men who've been on different sides of the argument weave in and out between each other, creating an ever changing pattern. At various times in the dance, the object of their difference and their unity - the Torah scrolls – are passed over them, and in between them. They are each different, yet because their gifts have been given and received, they are as one as God is one. Amen.

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