

Sermon preached by David Cruise at Hinde Street Methodist Church,
London W1 on Sunday 10th May 2015.

Readings: 1 John 5 verses 1-5; John 15 verses 9-17.

I've been told off more than once at the end of a service but one rousing I particularly remember was in 1997 in this church and 'hands up' I admit I deserved it.

Why was I told off? It was because it was the Sunday three days after the general election and this was the election when Tony Blair was swept into power. At that time there was so much hope – a brave new world was in the offing. And there was me preaching on prayer.

Sadly, although some hopes were met, there was the monumental blunder of the Iraq war and this over shadowed what good things emerged from New Labour. But back to the immediate – here we are 18 years later and again I'm preaching on the Sunday after a General Election – what should I say?

May I suggest that the lectionary has come to my aid particularly that passage from the first letter of John. For this letter was written by John to counter a heresy and that heresy was that this material world doesn't matter - the only thing that matters is the spiritual. The heresy went on to maintain that Jesus could not possibly have been fully human because God would never let himself get mixed up and contaminated by this material world.

John in fact in this letter turns this heresy on his head. First and foremost he says that Jesus indeed was fully human and this is conclusive evidence if we need it that this material world does matter, yes that politics do matter and what is more now we should base our way of living on what we see in Jesus Christ and his way.

And all this is spelt out very clearly in those 5 verses we heard read from the Epistle. And if we study those 5 verses there are three words or themes which stand out and these words are OBEDIENCE – LOVE – BELIEF.

So can we now reflect of these three words – yes – in the light of the General Election. And our thoughts are strengthened by the fact that today is the start of Christian Aid week and also that on Thursday we will be celebrating the Feast of the Ascension when we declare Christ is alive and active in our world today. So the first word OBEDIENCE.

When I was minister here, in the early days I was fortunate to have as my colleague Donald Soper. Now we can no longer assume that people know who Donald was but at one time Donald Soper was a household name through being on radio and television but not least for his weekly appearance at Speakers Corner. And every Sunday before going to speakers corner he would lead the 10am service and I would sit and listen. Now all preachers have their favourite themes and one of Donald's was OBEDIENCE. OBEDIENCE, not a word that sends a thrill of excitement down one's spine – but Donald believed in obedience which involved discipline not least when it comes to political leadership.

So I remember going to visit him at home after a leading politician hit the headlines of the tabloids over a personal scandal and I asked Donald how far personal moral behaviour should affect political duty and leadership? His reply was – ‘If one was subject to a lack of discipline in one’s personal life, was that person suitable to carry a nation’s trust?’

Hard, I thought at the time yet one of the factors that has loomed large in the last weeks is that the voters have lost faith in the personal integrity of politicians and surely this should be a sign to those entering Parliament the need to show discipline and integrity and to earn trust and respect in the leadership of this country.

Yes discipline, integrity, but what about OBEDIENCE? OBEDIENCE means observing a power beyond oneself and our own self interest.

But do we need a higher power or can we just trust ourselves and our own judgements?

I’m a great fan of AA, Alcoholics Anonymous the so called 12 Step Programme. I think we should be proud because this church is literally famous throughout the world as no less than seventy of these groups meet on our premises each week day.

Twelve Steps – what are they? Putting it simply Step one says ‘We all need help.’ Step 2 says: ‘we acknowledge there is a power beyond ourselves that can help to overcome temptation and that is God.’ And step three we seek God’s help. But God? Who or what is God? For AA members ‘God’ can for us be the God revealed in Jesus Christ’ or God in some other faith tradition or ‘God’ for us can just be the group that we meet with each week – but we must believe in something beyond ourselves and our own interests and from here the strength we need will come. And here we are back with Donald Soper’s OBEDIENCE’

OBEDIENCE – I would suggest that all of us need to recognise that we are answerable to a power beyond ourselves, be we politicians, or bankers or Methodist Ministers. Going by the letter of the law is not enough. St John is very clear - we all have a higher calling, and politicians and bankers and you and me need always to look beyond ourselves and John makes this very clear for us as Christians when he writes ‘When we love God we obey his commands and we love his children.’ And John goes on to say that God offers us the love which can be victorious over all those powers that seek to belittle or destroy humanity.

OBEDIENCE . Obedience for all for the sake of the larger good and for the Christian this means obedience to God as we see revealed in Jesus Christ.

And now the second word that John repeats and that is LOVE

Now chapter 3 of John’s letter is famous for its no nonsense down to earth sayings such as ‘God is love’. ‘We love God because he first loved us. ‘Perfect love casts out fear’ – And then that crunch one - ‘Any one who says they love God but hates their brother is a liar’.

LOVE as the hall mark of God’s love and God’s call for us to love one another.

The best election statement of intent I have ever heard came not from the TV or radio but in a cemetery. When I was a minister in the United Church of Zambia I was contacted one morning to say Kenneth Kaunda, the then President, was coming to a funeral that afternoon and would I be ready to lead the funeral and to receive him. I asked who is the deceased and the reply was 'the mother-in-law of one of the members of the government'.

And so the President arrived and we had a service in the church and then at the grave side. The grave was filled in and flowers placed and KK was given a wreath which he laid and then he stood back and began to sing 'Rock of ages.'

He then took out of his top pocket his famous white handkerchief and wiped his eyes and then he spoke 'My friends, you may wonder why I have come a long distance to be at this funeral - but I have come to bury my mother'. Ah, you say, but she is not your mother. She did not carry you in her womb, she did not suckle you at her breast But she is an African Mother, she is a Zambian mother, therefore she is my mother and that is what it means to be a Zambian – and I would have liked him to have gone on and said – This is what it means to be a Christian'.

Love for one another which includes my mothers and brothers and sisters who I don't know but who are linked by the bonds of our shared humanity and also through the love of God.

We may not always be happy with our politicians but I think it is remarkable and to their credits that the major parties ring-fenced the overseas aid budget. Now Europe is faced with the migrant situation with the terrible loss of life and it is not an easy call as to what to do.

It is all too easy to say 'We can't take upon ourselves the needs of the world and just get on with our own lives. Thank God for Christian Aid and all who seek to open our eyes to the needs of the poor and yes, do something about it and seek our help.

So too closer at home the needs of the poor in our midst. As we all know many churches are under pressure these days with shrinking and elderly congregations. It must be a great temptation just to turn inwards. But I sit on the Joseph Rank Trust which gives grants to churches and I am tremendously impressed that so many churches rather than turning in on themselves are becoming more and more outward looking and are opening up their premises to the wider community and offering help at all sorts of practical as well as spiritual levels. So recently he heard of a work in a deprived area of Coventry with young mothers, helping them to develop their gifts and take responsibility for their lives as well as such basic things as helping them to fill in forms correctly so that they don't find themselves facing sanctions and having grants withdrawn and having to fall back on the food bank.

Thank God for all who open our eyes to the wider world. Yet when John wrote his letter he was probably thinking of people closer at home – members of the Christian community.

I have always been impressed by the costly caring that goes on in the life of the church, not least this church. So much of this is unseen. Recently I came across a commentary on that old Celtic prayer called 'St Patrick's Breastplate. When it came to the sentence 'Christ in hearts of all that love me' it spoke of 'releasing the Christ in one another. Quite a phrase. Quite a thought. The need to support and be open to one another and yes, 'Release the Christ in one another – the Christ whose very nature is love

Three key words in those five verses in John's letter – first OBEDIENCE then LOVE and the third word BELIEF.

How important is BELIEF? John has no doubt as he writes 'Everyone who believes Jesus is the Christ is a child of God.'

I have recently been reading a remarkable book by a Peruvian Liberation theologian – Gustavo Gutierrez. It's title is 'God talk and the suffering of the Innocent.' Now this man has lived with the poorest of the poor and his faith has been challenged time and time again. The book is in part a commentary on the book of Job. The story which tells how Job, a good man loses everything and suffers a terrible disease and the question is - how will he react? His so called friends say 'You must have sinned and this is punishment – in other words a religion which is based on punishment and reward, But Job will not accept this – rather he sees something beyond and he glimpses the very mystery of God and he keeps faith although he doesn't understand.

And the question posed by this book is how do we reconcile the suffering of the innocent with belief in God?

Belief in God points us to God as revealed in the Old Testament where we see time and time again God's concern for the widow, the fatherless and the stranger. And then in the Gospels we read again and again of Jesus' concern for the crowd.

Yes, God's revealed concern for the poor - so we are challenged as believers to strive unceasingly for justice for the poor – this is what the writer calls the prophetic role – yes the role of Christian Aid.

But alongside that there needs to be a desire to be open to God – to be sensitive and open to the divine mystery. To enter into the very substance of belief – belief in the ultimate purpose of God.. This the author describes as the contemplative role – put simply to learn of Christ.

So three words from the letter of John which I believe speak to us as individuals, as the church and as a nation

OBEDIENCE – LOVE – BELIEF.

Amen.