

**Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2015 11am**

Hinde Street Methodist Church

1 kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43

Ephesians 6: 10-20

John 6: 56-69

On Wednesday this week, hackers leaked the personal data of 33 million users of the website Ashley Madison.

Ashley Madison is a global dating website for married people who want sex. With someone other than their husband or wife.

Its tag line is 'Life is short. Have an affair.'

Names, addresses, emails, sexual fantasies – all of these were posted on the 'dark web'.

Police officers, government officials, members of the military, diplomats and senior politicians have been implicated.

Now many of us may have been thinking, 'Serves you right.'

What else do you deserve if you deliberately set out to commit adultery?

There is a God!

But it seems to me that it's not that simple.

The information was released not by a morality group wanting to shame those who break the 7<sup>th</sup> commandment.

But by a cybergroup incensed that Ashley Madison charged users £15 to delete their data when they left the site, and then didn't do it properly.

And think of it this way.

How much would we pay to delete some things from our lives?

Things we wish we hadn't done...

Things we didn't do, when we really should have...

Unkind things we said without thinking...

No wonder every week we make our confession, here before God.

No wonder it's really important to us to hear the words of absolution.

Your sins are forgiven.

Deleted.

We all create a public persona, the person we would like to be.

The person we wish we were.

The person we want others to see.

And to a great extent, it's not a bad thing to do.

'Preach faith until you have it,' said John Wesley.

It's the Benedictine principle of 'habitus.'

If you behave in a certain way – repeat it hourly, daily, weekly, monthly – you will establish holy habits.

You will gradually become the person you want to be.

But imagine how it would be if, as we slowly grown towards being better people, our inner selves were exposed to the light.

If the rest of this congregation could log on to the dark web and see what's been going on in our lives.

What we're really like.

All the mistakes and the weaknesses and the things that make us curl up in a ball with embarrassment when we remember them at three in the morning.

All the gaps between what we say and what we actually do.

No wonder we like to put on armour.

The writer of Ephesians suggests that his readers take up the shield of faith.

Not the small, round *Aspis*, but the huge, full-length, leather-covered wooden *Thyreos* which Roman soldiers used to protect the whole body.

*Soldiers of Christ arise and put your armour on.*

Now of course Charles Wesley and the writer of Ephesians are talking about protecting ourselves against the assaults of temptation by laying claim to God's righteousness.

But all too often the armour we reach for is a protection for ourselves against being seen.

Because if we are truly seen – as we are – in all our messy reality – then we might not be admired.

We might not be approved of.

We might not be loved.

And I think it's the same urge which makes us want to protect God as well.

Through the summer we have followed the story of the people of Israel as they longed for a king.

Saul, David, Solomon.

It was David who wanted to build a house fit for God to live in.

It was his son Solomon who got to do it.

If you read the previous three chapters in the book of Kings, you'll see what was involved.

The writer of 1 Kings goes to great lengths to describe the great dressed stones for the foundations, the carved cedar walls, the inner sanctuary and the huge statues of cherubim overlaid with pure gold.

- 70,000 labourers and 80,000 stonemasons.
- 3,300 supervisors in charge of the work.
- 30,000 people conscripted as forced labour, sent to the Lebanon in shifts, 10,000 a month, to cut and haul the cedar trees needed for the temple.

Because in order to get the timber he needed for these vastly ambitious construction projects, Solomon entered into a rather shady political alliance with King Hiram of Tyre.

What was going on here?

Of course it was partly about Solomon establishing his dynasty with glorious, imposing buildings.

But it was mainly about guaranteeing God's presence in Israel.

If we build God a fabulous house, then surely he will stay here.

We can control him.

Manage him.

Make sure he doesn't drift off to support some other nation.

Make sure that we always know where he is.

Put him under an obligation to answer our prayers.

Just as we want to protect ourselves from the risk of being seen and known and vulnerable with full-length body armour, so we want to protect God as well.

Or rather to protect ourselves from a God who might behave in unpredictable, uncontrollable ways.

With ourselves safely covered up, and God safely locked into his gold-lined room, we will feel secure at last.

But the writer of 1 Kings wants his readers to reflect on what is going on.

To reflect theologically on what Solomon is doing.

He doesn't completely buy into the royal rhetoric of ambitious building programmes and managing God.

In the middle of the writer's verbal tour around the carvings and the precious metals used in the temple construction, he tells us that the word of the Lord came to Solomon:

*Concerning this house that you are building:*

*If you walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you, which I made to your father David.*

*I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel.*

You can't guarantee my presence by building me a gilded prison.

If you are committed to a right relationship with me...

If you want to live the kind of life that brings you closer to me...

That's when you will feel assured of my presence.

In today's passage from John's gospel, many of the disciples decide to leave Jesus.

*His teaching is difficult: who can accept it?*

They like the miraculous feeding of 5,000 people.

Who wouldn't?

That kind of God is very reassuring.

But Jesus tells them that the bread he is giving them – himself – his own flesh – is like the manna God gave their ancestors in the desert.

Only enough for today.

If you try to keep it and hoard it and ensure tomorrow's supply, it will go mouldy.

The people of Israel in the wilderness grumbled then, because they hated the insecurity of relying on God afresh each day..

They grumble now, for the same reason.

The moment the miracle has been performed, they get trapped on the lake in a storm, and Jesus is nowhere in sight.

Unpredictable.

Unreliable.

Risky.

All this talk of eating flesh – bizarre and irrational and making no sense.

Blasphemous, even.

And they already know that the Jerusalem hierarchy are looking for an opportunity to trap him and kill him, because he threatens their religious and political security.

No wonder many of the disciples turned back and no longer went about with him.

Jesus is not offering them personal armour.

He is not offering them a nice cosy house where they know God is safely and attractively located.

He is inviting them on a journey where anything might happen.

There is no insurance.

No guarantee of safety.

His relationship with God, and their relationship with him, is not easily definable.

You just have to take, eat.

Trust each day that there will be enough.

Be prepared to live in a cloud of unknowing.

Just as, when Solomon's priests withdrew from the Holy place:

*A cloud filled the Temple, so that the priests could not stand to minister: for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.*

Jesus recognises the human longing for security.

The human need for clearly defined understandings of God.

And the human reluctance to take risks.

He knows that committing to a journey with him flies in the face of rational argument.

It is not safe.

So he says to the twelve – his closest friends:

*Do you also wish to go away?*

And it's Simon, the impetuous, the courageous, the coward, the everyman, who says:

*Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life.*

*We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.*

And he knows it not because he is armoured against threat and hurt and damage.

Not because Jesus has provided a safe house where God can reliably be found.

(Though you'll remember that Peter's instinct, on the mountain of transfiguration, is to build a nice safe house for Jesus, Moses and Elijah.)

But because Jesus has invited him into a relationship that has made him feel alive in a way he never has before.

All his cherished assumptions and protections are being shed, one by one.

But he feels animated in every cell of his being.

And that relationship is not dependent on Peter hiding his true self.

Pretending to be good.

With Jesus, Peter can be himself.

He doesn't need armour.

He can be impetuous, courageous, cowardly... all those things that make him who he is.

He can make mistakes and say the wrong thing.

But Jesus still loves him.

Still trusts him.

Still invites him to follow.

He is seen, and known, and still loved.

And so he says:

*Lord, to whom can we go?*

*You have the words of eternal life.*

Last week the Daily Express was disgusted with BBC's Songs of Praise.

Not Hinde Street dancing in the aisles, but filming in the migrant camp outside Calais.

*This is how the BBC spends licence-payers' money,* the paper complained.

Watching the programme, it was thought-provoking to see how Christians from Eritrea, Ethiopia and Syria had built a makeshift church amongst the rubbish.

*The first thing they did when they moved to this jungle, this nothing place, is to build a church,*

        said a French aid worker.

The church is called St Michael's.

*We pray to St Michael, and to Gabriel, to protect us in a bad situation,*

        said Mima, a theology student from Ethiopia, who helps lead services there.

This little hut, built from pallets and polythene sheeting, is a long way from Solomon's temple.

And the migrants have learned that there is no armour to protect them from the situations they are escaping from, or from the criticism of French and British people who are scared of the 'swarm' of migrants threatening their country.

But they have learned something that it took the people of Israel a long time to learn.

And that perhaps we are still learning.

God moves with us.

God camps alongside us.

God pitches his tent wherever we are honest about our need of God.

The people of Israel learned the hard way.

Solomon's glorious temple was destroyed.

Their beloved city of Jerusalem was razed to the ground.

They had to learn to live in exile in Babylon.

The prophet Ezekial's bizarre vision of God in a vast chariot became a key image for them.

God isn't trapped in the rubble of that gold-lined sanctuary.

God is on the move.

This chariot has wheels that go in any direction.

God is travelling with you to Babylon.

So this makeshift church of St Michael's in the Calais jungle reminds those who worship there that God is alongside them on the journey.

As the gospel-writer John tells us in his very first chapter, God has pitched his tent among us.

We don't worship in a polythene tent.

We worship in this glorious Victorian building.

And we love it dearly.

But the temptation for us – as for Solomon – is to think that this is where God lives.

That this fabulous architecture is somehow a guarantee that we've got God taped down.

That we're safe.

Passages like today's lectionary remind us that when we settle into that mindset, we risk joining that stream of disciples walking away from the place where Jesus is:

On the road to Jerusalem.

So what can the temple offer its worshippers?

Because it's not all about Solomon's ego trip.

There is something really important about building a house for God, whether it's polythene sheets, or a kingdom's worth of cedar wood, or James Weir's architectural vision for West End Methodism.

When Solomon comes to dedicate the temple, he knows that God cannot really be contained in a man-made building, however magnificent.

*Will God indeed dwell on the earth?*

*Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built.*

But what Solomon hopes is that this will be a place where the needs of the people, and the loving faithfulness of God, will meet.

And it's not just our needs.

Yes, the people of Israel can come here to pray.

But also the foreigners.

*When a foreigner comes and prays towards this house, then hear in heaven, your dwelling place, and do according to all that the foreigner calls to you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name.*

How do we embody God's inclusive love here in our temple?

How do we enable all the people who come here to feel they belong?

To know that God is journeying alongside them?

To trust the words of eternal life?

This is not just a beautiful building where we gather to worship on Sundays. It's the place where homeless people drop in week by week on a Wednesday to share food and friendship.

It's the place where 69 anonymous groups meet to shed their armour, and support each other as they struggle with addictions.

It's the place where we offer a hot meal and a bed for the night to those without a place to call their own, during the coldest months of the year.

It's the place where people who live and work locally find a quiet hour on a Tuesday lunchtime.

It's a place where passers-by sit in our entrance to find peace, and to write their deepest longings and prayers in our prayer book.

Each week, as I read and pray with these heartfelt requests, I am reminded of what Solomon hoped for his temple.

That it should be a place where the needs of the people, and the loving faithfulness of God, will meet.

Earlier this month someone wrote in the prayer book:

*'Thank you for helping me find me.'*

As we move towards a new Connexional year, we need to re-examine what it means to be a temple here in Marylebone in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

How do we create a space where people – all people – 'us' as well as 'them' – can put our armour aside, hear the words of eternal life, and find out who we really are?

*Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place;*

*O hear in heaven your dwelling-place;*

*Heed and forgive.*

Amen