

25 February 2018

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **690** **The Church's one foundation**
 272 **From heave you came, helpless babe**
 350 **I cannot tell**
 663 **I, the Lord of sea and sky**

Readings: **Psalm 51.1-11**
 Genesis 17.1-17, 15-16
 Mark 8.31-38

"PICK UP YOUR CROSS"

Prayer

Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.

I was in Boots yesterday, on my way back from the ecumenical Lent book group and I came past a luscious wall of lipsticks – it was a special end of row section, 'Boots special finds!'

And here were livid purples, cherry reds, orange flames – and I read across the names. 'Hustle hard girl', 'strong not skinny,' 'bolder and braver,' even one called 'the future is female'.

When did lipstick get so political? What happened to simple 'rose?' Clearly I'm meant to be attracted enough to one that I plonk down £8 for it, and then become the thing?

I looked long enough at the display that the nice woman came over and asked 'Can I help you?' And she had a look that seemed too polite to finish the sentence '...because someone clearly needs to.'

I came home chastened, with a nice chapstick.

What's in a name? And what's in the drive to change ourselves? Well, who we are, who we are becoming, is important. What we are called.

It was good news for Abraham and Sarah to get new names (we heard about that in Genesis) because it was a sign of change – of hope and promise and new life. God named them to mark a change – a covenant and a promise.

They were still the same people, of course, but somehow it is like they have come out as more themselves – the selves that have been hidden up to now, the best

selves, the selves that hold promise not just for them, but for a better life for the whole world. That's important.

Their new names and this Covenant are not just for their own benefit, but mark something that is good news for the whole world. Not just for them and their lives.

Jesus knew this – that our impulse to grab hold of something that promises better living is strong. He was all about change – good news of repentance, of the kingdom come near - all about the impulse to latch onto something hopeful that we all have. Which is why, he began his talk to the crowd we heard in Mark 8 saying 'If any want to become my followers' – he is giving people a way to live, a clear sign post to be a new person.

So we're listening: then, he says, they must do these three things, he says. 'Deny yourselves, take up their cross, and follow him.'

And frankly, it'd be easier to buy a lipstick. The Cross is a hard sell, as we've already seen earlier in the reading, when Peter tries to rebuke Jesus – to get him to give a more practical, more hopeful message, something more like success and promise? Not death, but life, at least?

The cross is a hard sell, was then and is now. Not a one of those lipsticks I saw in Boots was called 'deny yourself.' Who'd want to buy that?

Think how much easier it would be to recommend a God, who said not 'deny yourself and take up your cross,' but 'Let me put money magically into your bank account,' like some preachers say will happen – albeit after you send them a little something first.

Think how much easier it would be to recommend a God who said not 'deny yourself and take up your cross,' but 'say a prayer and I will make some miraculous electrical charge that takes the detonators out of bombs as they fall, so no one is hurt by them today in Damascus?' That's a God I could get behind.

Take up your cross? The son of man must suffer? No wonder Peter rebuked him - What is Jesus on about, and how can we recommend this way of life?

And especially when churches have at times misunderstood or mistransmitted this message to glorify suffering – or to keep people who are suffering from trying to change a situation – '...this is just your cross to bear, that you have no money, that you have a disease, that you do a certain kind of work or look a certain way,' or whatever. This is surely wrong? If taking up our cross is about accepting suffering, it is surely never about being a doormat, but only ever about accepting the cost of changing a situation.

Thing is, we've tended to focus on that middle instruction, at the expense of the other two – deny yourself, and follow me. And friends Jesus gave us all three – deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me – a way of new life, of hope – not just for each of us as individuals, but for our whole world – making us not into new different people, but more ourselves – coming out into the full and best people God has made

us – and carrying in our lives the promise for a better world for all – just like Sarah and Abraham with their new names.

I want to be new – I want to be ‘bold and brave,’ I want to follow Jesus, to know the freedom and joy that stretches ahead of us like that beautiful river running through the city of God.

Deny yourself. It is Lent, and we are in a season of fasting – denying ourselves. But what does it mean, to deny ourselves? This is not about giving up crisps, good as that might be.

If I am going to pick something up – my cross - It makes sense to me to put something down first – before I pick that next something up. This makes sense. Deny yourself.

Put down notions of self and success that are about making myself safe, when others are not.

Put down notions of self-esteem that depend on having the right lipstick or the right job, or degree, or car or lifestyle – that measure things and people by usefulness and superficial things rather than by the heart and the image of God in them.

Put down the work of anxious toil – the seductive busyness and constant pressure that is far too busy and important to take a night off, let alone a sabbath.

Put down my screen and phone, in favour of thought and attention to the people around me, and to my own emotions.

Deny idols of self – and then, with my hands empty and my shoulders light – pick up the cross.

Pick up attention to the world and how people are hurt by our way of life. Pick up the cost of doing things a little differently. Just a little.

Pick up attention, care to our bodies and minds – even when this means noticing bad feelings, difficult or unfinished business, corners of our hearts that remain hurt, uncomforted.

Pick up responsibility.

Pick up the notion that a child dying under bombs in a city far away is my business. And children marching in the streets calling politicians to change is my business.

Pick up the notion that the covenant God made through Abraham – that promise – it is still ours and it still means good news – but not just for my family and the folk who look like me – but for everyone.

Pick up a willingness to sacrifice, to risk myself in service.

Pick up a willingness to risk hurt by being kind.

Pick up the love which suffers long alongside, and does not come out of the cold until everyone is safe inside.

Pick up the complexity of contemporary political problems – no quick fixes no thinking the work is done when we make scapegoat and three word headline, but pick up subtle, strong and nuanced policy. About homelessness. And immigration. And education. And peace-making.

And most of all, pick up the sense of God's love pouring like a stream of compassion over us – the sense of God's love longing for us, calling us, working through us. Forgiving us.

And then, follow him.

The early Christians were called the 'people of the way.' They followed the life and lifestyle of Jesus as much as they could –
And others inherited this way and adapted it to culture, time and place –
And here we are, with our little way as Methodists – our history of service, and study of scripture, of sacrament – in the tradition of the Wesleys we follow the way of Jesus.

We follow Jesus in our history of pouring water and saying words of blessing as we baptise – and as we grow in grace as adults, studying our faith and scriptures. We follow Jesus in breaking word, and bread and pouring wine to re-member and call him among us.

We follow him as we take time for worship, this odd countercultural practice of community. We follow him as we sing, and pray.

We follow Jesus as we serve, and advocate and welcome. And yes, as we not only pray, but work for peace. Starting across our own kitchen tables, and moving out into our streets and workplaces, the public life we share in social media, and the public life we share by getting to know our neighbours face to face.

In all these things, we follow him.

Next week, we will do something deeply Methodist, and deeply Christian, and a little more public than usual.

Our 945 Sunday service will be a love feast – at the love feast we have bread and water, there is a chance too to share a verse or a song that has meant much to us, or an experience of God – or just call to mind and offer in silence. Our children will have a chance to make 'loving cups', and we'll all have the chance to use one – these are the two handled jugs that usually only live in the museum of Methodism downstairs. But these ones anything but museum pieces. These loving cups make community. Make companions – literally, those who break bread together. And we, as companions, make a different world.

We do this every year, and I'm told only a small handful of us do it -

this year, and the communion that follows at 11, will be advertised as part of the BBC festival of civilisation.

It is 50 years since Kenneth Clark's series Civilisation thrilled audiences - The series will also be examining the questions of what makes a civilisation, and asking how different ideas of civilisations have reinforced different cultural ideas and values. Here is where we come in, along with other partners.

We have advertised the love feast here, and the communion service that follows, to all and sundry as an example of what we think makes for a better world, one that equips people to love, and live, and serve. All people. One that prepares us to deny ourselves, to take up the cross, and to follow Jesus. And after the service at 11, we will also have prayers at the grave of John Wesley, remembering the day he died.

SO I hope more than a handful of us will try the love feast next week, for our own upbuilding, and that of this community.

In doing this, our Museum is stepping out into public and into the worshipping life of this congregation, proclaiming that the artefacts we have in cases downstairs are not just things, but are symbols and tools by which we make the kingdom come. Well done the Museum.

We practice the habit of some early Methodists in this place which means so much to so many Methodists around the world – in the love feast we remind ourselves with the simplest food and drink – bread and water – the feast that awaits us in God's love.

Deny ourselves, take up our cross, follow him – such a deceptively simple way of life, still a good way, still a way that defines who we are.

Abraham and Sarah got new names: you and I are renewed each time we do these things together. 'Bolder and braver', (remember the lipstick?) more loving not because of anything we have to pay for or put on, but because we are more and more ourselves – more and more on the outside and in public the forgiven, beloved, children of God, the Body of Christ.