

HYMNS: 11 "Holy, holy holy, Lord God Almighty"
402 "Go to the world!"
404 "God's spirit is in my heart"
470 "Lord for the years your love has kept and guided"

READINGS: Matthew 28:16-20
Acts 3:1-7; 12-16

"VISUAL AIDS"

There is a well known proverb, 'when the cat's away the mice will play'. We are in an interregnum, (a word which means 'between reigns'). One superintendent has now left; the new superintendent is not here yet, so this morning, while they are both away, I want to do something slightly different.

First and it's very, very rare for me, I have abandoned the use of the lectionary. The lectionary is an international three-year series of set lessons for reading at worship. You can find it all set out at the end of the Methodist Worship Book. It is used in all the major churches all over the world, so I take it very seriously, but as I said, 'when the cat's away' I have chosen my own readings, for a particular reason.

Second I want to use some visual aids in my sermon this morning, again something I have not known here before. However, before you look for screens to come swinging down from the roof onto which pictures can be projected, I should say that the pictures are already being projected to you.

My visual aids are the three stained glass windows, behind the pulpit, which you will have looked at many times, depending on how long you have attended here. Perhaps I should say at this point, if you are not sitting in a position where you can see the three windows, you might like to move if there is a space near you. Otherwise I will describe what is in the windows, so I hope you do not feel left out, and you may like to have a better look later.

My purpose in doing this is not to offer an illustrated lecture, but to share with you the challenging theology which lies behind these windows. I hope that you will yourself feel challenged in your Christian life. That after all is their purpose; that is why they were designed and chosen to be here. They are a challenge to you as you sit there. What we can see while we attempt to worship God affects how we worship. What we see can be a help or a hindrance; I believe these windows can be a help.

It's not my job to stray onto the territory of the heritage stewards by going into their history, but just a little background. They were unveiled on three separate occasions in 1893 to mark the 100th anniversary of the death of John Wesley. Actually they arrived two years late; 1891 was the centenary. Each was a gift from a different branch of the Methodist Church, branches which

were not to be united until 1932. But each branch looked to this Chapel, a Wesleyan Methodist Church, as its mother church.

The Window on your Left was from the Wesleyan Reform Union;
The Middle Window was from the United Methodist Free Churches;
Window on your Right was from the Primitive Methodist Church.

They were a co-ordinated gift from three churches, in differing degrees in rivalry at that time with the Wesleyan Methodist Church, to which they gave them. Rivalry was put aside.

The choice of design of these three windows, all made in Germany, is unusual. How often in an old church you have looked at three windows at the front of a church or cathedral which show the birth of Christ, Christ on the Cross, and the last Judgement. Only one of these fits this formula, the window on the left, which is of the Adoration of the Magi, the wise men.

1 The Adoration of the Magi

If you look at it you will see that Mary and three Wise Men form a circle surrounding the infant Jesus. A rather mature Christ-child sits up on Mary's lap in a very alert way, as though he is ready and anxious to receive his gifts. Three Magi (two white men, one black) are dressed in exquisite robes, symbolising their royalty. Mary wears traditional blue, depicting a virgin. In medieval times the most expensive colour to produce was rich blue, so it was traditionally reserved for Mary. Top left, a rough, realistic stable shelters Mary and Jesus. A dark night sky reveals the guiding star.

Bottom left you can see a crown on a cushion, placed at the feet of Christ. Perhaps it symbolises the idea that all the crowns of the world were, and will be, laid at the feet of Christ who is Lord of All. I have always been puzzled by the red column on the right and have seen it as a candle, representing Christ as the Light of the World, but it is not lit. I am told it is a broken column, you can see the crack across it, it is meant to represent the breaking of the old Covenant made with Abraham and the coming in of new Covenant in Christ. There is Hope for the world.

The window reminds us that the Good News of Jesus Christ is for all the world. It was revealed to three Gentile Wise Men, Kings. That is why we sang, 'Wise Men seeking Jesus'.

2 The Apostolic Commission

Let's look at the centre window. What do you see here?

This window represents the Great Commission, the words of Jesus we read earlier in the service from the end of Matthew's Gospel.

'All authority in heaven and earth has been given to me.

Go forth therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. And remember I am with you always to the end of the age'.

Immediately after this Jesus ascended into heaven, a scene which is never easy to picture. Here we see Christ wearing a white tunic and a royal red mantle, his right arm raised against the sky. His halo is divided into three sections, representing that he is part of the Holy Trinity. He rightly dominates the window and is surrounded, if you count carefully, by 11 disciples. (Poor Judas had hanged himself and Matthias had not yet been elected in his place). On top right you can see Peter and John, wearing the same coloured garments, which are meant to represent equality. It is a fine and powerful representation of the climax of Jesus' ministry. 'Go forth and make disciples'.

This is why we sang, 'Go to the world'.

3 Solomon's Porch

The most puzzling window is on the right. I initially spent a long time (but not during sermons) puzzling over what it represents. You may be more skilled or more devotional than I am, and worked it out. It represents the preaching ministry of the early Church. The dominant figure at the centre of the picture is Peter deliberately in a similar pose to Christ. He is preaching after the experience of Pentecost. If you look you will see there is no chance of confusing Jesus and Peter. Peter has no halo; he wears a yellow mantle, and is not as dominant as Christ in the centre window. John is also there but behind Peter. Here the early Church is preaching and healing, carrying our Christ's commands, as we read from Acts.

The background is not the walls or buildings of Jerusalem, but the ruins of Mow Cop Hill Folly in Staffordshire. There in 1807 the first open-air camp meeting was held which inaugurated the Primitive Methodist Church. They managed to sneak their little mark into the picture. The window says that it is our responsibility to continue to preach the Gospel. That is why we will shortly sing, 'God's spirit is in my heart'.

But let me make two more points about the theology and challenge of these three windows. First a general point, and then a specific point.

Medieval Theology of Light.

When stained glass windows were first introduced in medieval churches and cathedrals they were stunning. Do those of you who grew up with black and white television remember when you first saw colour television? Stained glass windows had a similar effect. The stories of the Bible, the presence of the saints, were vividly and life-changingly displayed.

Medieval theology was all about light. First there was 'In the beginning God said, Let there be light'. This is the light which illumines the world.

Then, second, the art of the window maker was to use this light so that God's glorious light was revealed through illuminating the stories of the Bible; the windows mediated God's light in a Christian context. You will all have seen how different and meaningless stained glass windows are if it is dark outside.

They need God's light to shine and sing out the Bible story chosen by the window maker, as his or her sermon in glass.

Third, the light of God, mediated through the coloured light of the window, strikes your heart and lights it up that you may see God. The windows preach God's word to you that your life may be changed.

This theology is expressed, as it were in a reverse way, from the human to the Divine, in the words of the well-known hymn 'Teach me my God and King' by George Herbert. You will know the verse:

'A man that looks on glass,
On it may stay his eye;
Or if he pleaseth, through it pass,
And then the heavens espy'.

That is the first point. But these windows are not medieval; they are the product of the late 19th century, and carry a contemporary message.

I mentioned earlier that the more traditional theology of three central windows is about Jesus' Birth, his suffering on the Cross, and then the Resurrection or Final Judgement. These windows offer a different and challenging theology. With Christ centred, these windows emphasise Hope, Good News, and the continuing work of Christ through the Proclamation of Gospel.

It was the challenge of late nineteenth-century Methodism to carry the good news to all the corners of the world. There is Hope, there is Good News in Christ, and we must continue, like Peter, to Proclaim it. The windows are saying to a congregation, 'Don't just sit there – do something!'

Let me share a personal experience. A few months ago we brought a friend here, an Anglican, who wanted to learn more about Methodism and this Chapel, so we joined her after the service on the tour. (In those days you didn't get a priority cup of coffee!). Our guide, many of you will guess who it was, was a leading member of the Fijian community at this Chapel. To his ancestors late nineteenth-century missionaries, perhaps inspired by pictures like these, took the Christian gospel to far-flung Pacific islands. I cannot tell you how moved I was to have the Christian story of this Chapel, my British story, re-told to me by someone from Fiji. And the presence here of fellow Christians who are represented by the dozens of different national flags here, are the fruit of that proclamation 'Go into all the world', of the Christ represented in this central window.

I began by saying that we are in an interregnum, while the 'cats' are away. This interregnum is an opportunity to re-think what we do here. People have been attracted to this church for many reasons, not least by the challenging ministry of Leslie Griffiths, and I don't decry that in any way. It has been a privilege to hear it. But if that is all we have come for, look again at these three windows. They represent a task and a challenge that falls on all of us.

To us has been given a promise of Hope in the birth of Christ;
To us has been given a command to 'Go into all the world';
To us has been given the challenge to continue as Christ's people to preach
the Good News ourselves, in word and deed.

May these windows remind us, Sunday by Sunday, of our calling! Amen.