

Hymns:	87	Praise to the Living God
	238	Lead us, heavenly Father lead us
	459	Captain of Israel's Hope, and Guide
	82	O Lord my God, when I in awesome wonder

Readings: Ephesians 6.10-20
John 6.56-69

“Thick love, not thick skin”

Prayer – Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the word of my lips, and the mediation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. AMEN.

Right off the bat I want to name that we have the best possible passage from Ephesian 6 for anyone who owns too many pairs of shoes or aspires to – put on the whole armor of God. I read that list of things to help us stand up against evil – truth, faith, righteousness – salvation – and put on whatever shoes will prepare you to proclaim the Gospel of peace.

As we go along I want to ask you, should your mind wander in this sermon to think which shoes that would be?

That are going to prepare you to proclaim the Gospel of peace? For some of us it will be cozy slippers, for some nurses shoes – maybe for you it is football trainers, doc maartens, or brogues. I hope for a few of you it might be dancing shoes.

And for my interest, let me know on the door what they are.

But we are about more than shoes today. We are about the walk, and oh my yes about proclaiming the Gospel of peace.

Friends, it is wonderful to be back at the Chapel, having been these last two Sundays at the Oxford Institute of Methodist Studies – a global gathering of close to 200 scholars and pastors working on one question – Revival, Reformation, Revolution – how will we renew our global Methodist tradition for the next generation.

And lots of big words were used and big ideas – there are some very clever, very thoughtful, very kind, Methodist professors and theologians – many of whom serve God not just in universities and churches, but in warzones, or places of extreme poverty, or extreme political and economic difficulty.

Over and over again, a theme emerged – reviving, reforming church is not about having the right programmes or even the right doctrine, – the newest building or best people or the most people. It was about something else – something actually quite simple requiring nothing less than full commitment, something I want to call a thick love, without the thick skin to go with it.

I listened to different people at our Oxford Methodist Conference from different academic disciplines tried to describe this thick love, without the thick skin mix – a low anxiety, joyful, confident church – urgent in confronting evil, but not defensive nor shrill, not jumping at every shadow – always on the side of the weak, often among the weak – loving God and because of that, a church humble enough to laugh at itself when it is ridiculous. And to correct itself where needed, asking God and the world’s forgiveness, making amends. Most of all, a church formed around the Jesus, bread from heaven for the world.

Thick love, without the thick skin. Barefoot, even?

This Sunday our readings are the last in a series of about six weeks working with bread and flesh and storms – over and over – bread and flesh and storms - last week we grappled with what it means for Jesus to be the flesh for the world, in the world – and today we finally get to the end.

Quite literally, the end because his teaching has made for so much complaining and confusion that everyone has gone home. Such that when he turned to Simon Peter and the original 12 disciples to say ‘Are you going too,’ and they say something a bit like ‘You are the son of God, where else would we go, even if we don’t understand what you are saying or why?’

Thick love, without the thick skin. Because we will need to stay with Jesus past the point of comfort, past the point of control if we are going to be a part of this. And we will be wounded – by the brokenness of the world will be more and more in our lives and in our minds and attention the more time we spend with Jesus.

If we stick with Jesus beyond the point of comfort the way the disciples did – our flesh will be in the game too, not just his, for the world –
our way of life for its peace,
our prayer and faith for its repentance from historic sin, and its change toward justice.
our use of money, and competence, and advocacy for its well-being.
Most of all, our faith in the grace of God for the salvation of all people.

I heard someone say last week, the most dangerous word in the Methodist vocabulary is the word ‘ALL.’ I’ll let you think about that one while you are still thinking about shoes, shall I?

Because as the letter to the Ephesians reminded us, the hard day will come, and it is today – and the evil that is around us now demands more from church than 8 point mission plans.

If God forbid it, this country should ever run short of food, or medicine, or if conflict should spill out of media speculation into the street as it has before, no one will be asking the Methodist church what its doctrine of the Lord's Supper is.

But you, and other people fed on the body of Christ – formed at the table and fed by the body and blood that is from heaven, for the world – People formed at this table and fed by it will be among those who respond.

And churches will need to be places of sanctuary. And we are, and we will be.

God forbid it, but friends the hard day is come, with the creeping invitation in our public life to suspect those who are different – the temptation to divide person from person and protect my own and hoard and wall in: to walk past poverty, or deprivation – to deny the reality of the rise in violence in our city, for instance - these demand more from church than a snappy strapline and a slick worship band.

The hard day is come, any time any one of us is tempted to return evil with evil.

And when we ourselves are wounded by the world around us, how will we respond? With steps in shoes that go towards peace, or towards something else? The full armor of God is about preparing ourselves to stand up against evil with thick love, not with anger or violence.

I heard The Revd Professor Peter Storey, sometime President of the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and now well past 50 years of ministry, preach about that church in its opposition to Apartheid in the 1960s and 70s. The State, the law declared that black people and white people could no longer meet together.

And began to clear black residents out of section 6 in Johannesburg, where his mixed church was. The whole Methodist church had decided to resist the law and preserve its unity, and organized transport so members could attend, endured persecution, arrests, disruption of worship, and ultimately, was banned by the government in January of 1978. He himself was interrogated for over 20 hours by police.

I want you to think for a moment about what that commitment would do to a church – what that would do to this church – to our budgets, to our committees and programmes, to our hopes and our ability just to keep opening the doors each week. I mean, when that is going on does the property committee still meet? Does the sandwich rota still function?

And he said two things stuck with him as he looks back, now forty years on – first, he said that in church, they had to choose what really mattered. And we do too.

Second, he said the solidarity of people around the world, the global Methodist, and Christian, and interfaith community who took risks and stood with them – made just enough space for hope to keep them going to imagine that Apartheid could end.

Thick love. Love that comes from having stayed with Jesus ourselves beyond the point of first interest, beyond the point of comfort, through the times of confusion or grief, and all the way through death to resurrection.

Thick love, but not thick skin.

So that we can walk together, proclaiming a Gospel of peace. Can stop the cycle of offense to offence, violence to violence.

What does this look like in your life? In the life of this church? I think it means renewing our commitment to our local community, while also keeping sight of our global responsibility, our global goals as part of the Methodist people. We should be audacious, ambitious in naming those goals – local, and global.

I am heartened by the work we may achieve with the Whitechapel Mission this year, working against rough sleeping and homelessness right here. Remember, we are one of two places in the UK to receive a Global Mission Fellow this autumn, ours from Cambodia – and named Tony – and he will be helping us in that very local work. This week's Methodist Recorder has the sobering statistic that the Whitechapel Mission has seen a 100% increase in uptake of its services, in the last five years. From 7 am every morning, it serves several hundred hot breakfasts and showers for homeless and rootless people, on our doorstep not 15 minute walk away. This is Methodism.

And I am heartened by your work helping young adults get ready for the work place, and older people find purpose and friendship, and younger ones support as parents.

I am exhilarated by the numbers of heritage visitors and spiritual pilgrims from all over the world who come here – over 20,000 this year welcomed.

I am awed to hear testimony from so many of you about your walk of faith. What you are doing in your professional or personal lives, to resist cynicism whether you work in the NHS or education or a shop or an office, whether you work in a profession the world tends to respect, or not. To claim your power in Jesus Christ - to heal and house and help. No one can take that from you. I'm talking people really changing each others lives. Choosing what matters.

But if it means renewing our local commitment, having thick love here means keeping our eyes also on the global scene. And as a church I think it means advocating against the public temptations and counsel to divide and suspect one another. To offer sanctuary for all here. TO be a place where global Methodism, and others, can have conversations they might not be able to have at home, and to know each other a little better. Our names, our stories.

And in all this, local and global, we will not to stop at the hand wringing judgment that apportions blame for the way things are to one person, one party or one group – but to

stand up and be part of a new way – this is the thin skin, that will risk ourselves to make peace. The most dangerous word in the Methodist vocabulary is ALL?

Because we love Jesus and we have stayed with him beyond the point of comfort, our flesh, with his, for the world in the world with the world. No other reason. I encourage you, of course, to spend more time with Jesus. To read your Bible, talk to him in your prayer life about parts like today's passages that folk have never understood. And of course, continue to eat the bread.

Our goal is never to get a thick skin and call it faith, so nothing can touch or wound or offend us. Our goal is to stay with Jesus and learn a thick love for the world around us, and ourselves, that means we will not NEED a thick skin. TO do this by putting on all that armor – the truth, and righteousness, salvation and the rest. And the shoes, remember the shoes.

See, none of those things prepare us to fight against the world, but rather they prepare us to stand against evil, and to love the world well. Tenaciously. To keep loving when it hurts us. And to let our hearts break and to keep loving it. That's it, that's all. Simple.

So we will walk from this worship, into this city, sometimes great distances. What shoes will you put on, to prepare you to proclaim the Gospel of peace? Because we are walking together, and our God before us.