

17th February 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: **91** “The God of Abraham Praise”
 481 “The Lord’s my shepherd, I’ll not want”
 154 “Come, divine Interpreter”
 459 “Captain of Israel’s host, and Guide”
 247 “I danced in the morning”

Readings: **Jeremiah 17:5-10**
 Luke 6.17-26
 Psalm 1

“Blessings and Woes”

Let us pray:

Holy God, break your word among us for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be acceptable in your sight our strength, and our Redeemer.
Amen.

Listen to how Justin Martyr, described Christian worship in Rome in 150 AD:
‘On the day named after the sun all, whether they live in the city or countryside, are gathered together in unity. Then the records of the apostles or the writings of the prophets are read for as long as there is time. When the reader has concluded, the presider in a discourse admonishes and invited us into a pattern of these good things. Then we all stand together and offer prayer. And, as we said before, when we have concluded the prayer, bread is set out to eat, together with wine and water. The presider likewise offers up prayer and thanksgiving as much as he can, and the people sing out their assent saying the amen. There is distribution of the things over which the thanks have been said and each person participates, and these things are sent by the deacons to those who are not present....’

Not all that different to what we do today, indeed. And if we count backwards, we are only really 25 lifetimes away from the time of Justin Martyr, and the time of Christ. Today I want to reflect a little about worship as held in our texts, as handed on to us from generations of those before, and as we hand it on. I am convinced our worship is the best offering to God when it carries blessings and woes both, side by side – a fullness and reality about life that helps us become not more appropriate, but more Christlike.

Blessings and woes held together in worship, to help us become not more appropriate, but more Christlike.

Friends, today we celebrate 20 years since our Methodist Worship book was published, launched to much media interest and comment, from this Chapel. And you can read the story of the writing of this worship book from one very personal view in our Window on Wesley’s this month, as John Lampard shares his memory of

the process that led to publication – and in the Methodist Recorder available in the foyer, you can read an article as well about it.

Worship, and what we think we are doing in worship, and what we think God is doing as we worship, are important things. Because we shape our worship – by tradition, by the spaces we use, by the words and songs we offer – we shape our worship, and thereafter it shapes us.

It forms us, re-forms us, changes us by the habit of what we do. Not usually all in one go, but like going to the gym or brushing our teeth shapes us, worship shapes us.

So how does our tradition, this book help us?

Keith Hadaway has written that service of worship ‘...should be like a raft ride down a mountain river, with exciting passages that leave us breathless and calm places where we sit and contemplate – with bends and curves where we cannot see where we are going.’ (Keith Hadaway, 2001, p. 82.)

And even more starkly, Annie Dillard, and American commentator has advised that ‘...It is madness to wear ladies’ straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us to where we can never return.”

I am remembering an igbo proverb I have shared here before, ‘the family that pounds yams noisily should not assume the family that pounds yams quietly is starving.’ , ‘the family that pounds yams noisily should not assume the family that pounds yams quietly is starving.’

In relation to our worship and the blessings contained in it, this means that even though I am in complete agreement with what Annie Dillard said about crash helmets, the important moments in worship are not all about the big noise or splash: what about the silence we keep in worship, held longer than is polite, held long enough for a sense of communal prayer to build – each person holding that prayer together until the silence is almost audible? Or our singing a Taizé chant, gently to the point where we lose our own voice in the voice of prayer? What about the service attended only by one or two, but held in such devotion that the prayer seems to sing to fill the room?

What we do in worship forms us, re-forms us, ideally makes us people who have those deep roots described both in our Psalm, and in the passage from Jeremiah we read today – deep roots so we do not get anxious when a drought comes. Or when heat burns. Deep roots in which our lives are built together with each other’s in community, and built into God’s life here.

Blessings and woes both, belong in worship, and we see them both in the Worship Book.

Blessings first. In this book we have ample space for blessing – using the book gives us a discipline to remember the kinds of blessing Jesus speaks about in Luke – blessed are you poor, hungry.

One of the most common misconceptions, and an easy one to make, is that the people or congregation in worship are like an audience – and the leaders like the actors on a stage to thrill or convict, teach or calm them. Where is God, if anywhere in this idea about worship? Well perhaps a stage hand or off stage prompter.

This misconception can be made whether it is an act of worship with a band and projection screen, or with someone in full brocade vestments swinging incense.

Whatever the particular culture of worship, Christians are never an audience – this is not the tradition Justin Martyr spoke of. Our Worship book, and the worshipping

tradition of John and Charles Wesley, the others on whose shoulders we stand, put the congregation at the centre – not the leader. So if somehow the leader does not turn up, the people can still pray together, conducted by any one of them.

SO our book our tradition takes the presence of real people, real lives – each one - seriously and doesn't just make space for them, but relies on them – we who are poor, hungry, weeping – right now. Worship cannot be done by someone else on your behalf, in our tradition, cannot be outsourced. There is space to understand these realities of our lives, and the life of the world. As blessings, paradoxically. How can these things be a blessing, and be a blessing in worship?

Well not for nothing does the book start with daily prayer, the Methodical use of scripture, and praying the same prayers though we be all dispersed. The book prompts us to remember special moments of healing. Of penitence even – when we confess our sin together, in the beginning of worship, that prayer is actually accomplished in our offering it. In real time, blessing of forgiveness is offered here – not to people who have never done anything wrong, but to us – we who need forgiveness and live in a world that needs forgiveness! Here is blessing!

In worship, our Book teaches us, God is the only audience for our worship – receiving the acts of thanksgiving, the prayers of each heart, the gestures we make together and the words we say in common. We are like an orchestra playing together, performers each with her own melody and his own instrument, conducted so as to play together, to build a piece of music larger than its individual parts, for God's pleasure.

Too often, I suspect in worship there can be a tyranny of sunshine, a desire for victory, to put away from us the hard or unresolved parts of our self, and our community. God is strong enough to offer blessing in the midst of hardship. In the day of grief and weeping, in the day of poverty. Our worship book gives us a discipline of receiving blessing on those hard days Jesus spoke about, of not moving too quickly away from our own need to praise, and thank, and confess.

There is a humility, a comfort in using words that have been said over generations in worship, in making those same words today into vessels to hold the blessings of our lives. SO when we make a prayer and offer the bidding – 'lord in your mercy,' and we respond together 'hear our prayer,' we are making the particular blessings of our lives part not just of God's story today, but part of the whole history of people who have ever prayed those words.

Not that we never use new words, or new forms of word and music and worship – but we hold a balance. That makes an idol neither out of old or new, but treats both alike in John Wesley's words, not as ends in themselves, but as 'means' of grace. And it means in our worship we make bridges between old language and new. This is our tradition.

Woes, now.

If there is space for blessing in the worship we share, there is space for woe. Note, Jesus' understanding of woe, the hard day, the day that should really trouble us – Jesus says the day of real woe is the day when perhaps we forget about the need of the world because our own need is filled.

Woe to us, if we laugh now, if we are full now. Out fullness our laughter, our richness – it is not that it is condemned, but that it is feeble blessing on its own compared to what God wants to do in the whole world. I want to say that again. Fullness, richness, laughter – these are not bad things, but we who have them now and think that is all God offers – our own personal safety – we have not even scratched the surface of God's gift of blessing in our world. Woe to us then, if we

think that's all we can hope for. Jesus promises more – offers more – changes us more than that. And our worship makes space for woe – gives us the discipline of not moving too quickly past it.

On Thursday, some of you were sorting donations of all kinds at Whitechapel Mission – the room was full 2-3 meters of bin liners of clothing, shoes, jumpers and coats – toiletries. And we were a bit overwhelmed – no space to move, no order, where to begin? Without a guide, without any notion of where things had come from – but such intention for blessing in the gifts – some had individually wrapped gifts of socks around a chocolate bar – think of someone sitting and wrapping each one – it humbles me, me whose feet are warm and dry right now – it gives me a deep sense of woe to make me remember both the one whose feet are not warm, dry right now, but also a deep sense of blessing from God, from the intention of the one who wrapped each gift. Woe to me, if I am not able to get a notion that God intends more than just my warm feet. It also reminds me of what Justin Martyr wrote about Christian worship in 150 AD – it did not end at the door of the house, but carried that which was left to the poor and the widow. The dismissals at the end of the worship – go in peace to love and serve the Lord - in our book are meant to remind us of this – they are not just words, but commands of scripture and prayers.

We hear in our worship of woes – we open scripture and come alongside it – we read it together and chew on it – and then scripture will continue to play in our hearts, our ears and chew on us, read our lives. A sermon is only one way to break the loaf and share it – there are many others.

In our worship book, it is not all about baptism and new life – our book contains the words that will be said I hope over my body when I am gone – ashes to ashes, dust to dust – we commit our sister/our brother to God, in sure and certain hope of the resurrection. Our book carries words for times when our own words will fail. Times of the deepest sadness, or greatest hardship.

Blessings, woes, together build our worship – so that week by week, in the mysterious interchange of Spirit and Body, bread and grace, we are built into vessels for Christ.

We be-come, we are changed – to have roots so deep that the day of trouble does not make us anxious? That our secret hearts are open to God whose mercy flows like an ever rolling stream?

The words of the Psalm are the inheritance we are promised, built in worship. For this hour we drop in, we eavesdrop on a conversation between God and the world that is ongoing – praise and lament, and call and promise - the never ending song of creation offered to our creator.

Happy birthday to our worship book, yes – but happy birthday to each of us – we gathered here – in this room several millennia of Christian experience – gathered here as the same disciples Justin Martyr described, gathered to testify to the same blessing, the same woe, the same grace, the same call – Worship well, worship graciously, worship gently with all the noise you can make and all the silence you can bear – each speaking of the love which outlasts noise and silence both.