

3rd March 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 113 **O worship the King, all-glorious above**
 503 **Love Divine, all loves excelling**
 574 **Because you have said**
 55 **Immortal, invisible, God only wise**

Readings: **Exodus 34:29-35**
 Luke 9:28-36

“Best of all is, God is with us”

Prayer

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.

Besty Ritchie, a contemporary of John Wesley’s, gave this account of his death: She states,

“...some of those who were most used to hear our dear Father’s dying voice would be able to interpret his meaning; but though he strove to speak we were still unsuccessful: finding we could not understand what he said, he paused a little, and then with all the remaining strength he had, cried out, ‘The best of all is, God is with us’”

John Wesley died on the second of March, 1791, and we by tradition remember his death at his years’ mind, as it is called.

It is the last Sunday before Lent, and a good time to consider what it means to hold the Wesleyan tradition – how we conserve it.

Into that question, which is already and always deliciously present with us in the life of any Methodist church - we read the scriptures set for this Sunday: Moses shining with the glory of God, returned from receiving the Covenant, and this mysterious story of Jesus transfigured on the mountain – his face and robes shining.

In conversation with these scriptures, I want to consider our heritage from yesterday, our holiness today, and counsel a little bit of humility for the future. Heritage, holiness, humility.

Heritage first.

Towards the end of his life, in his journal John recorded his grave dismay that the Chapel committee – we still have one – that the Chapel committee had met and taken a number of decisions he felt overturned the whole thrust of his work over decades – the first and one that offended him the most was allowing in this place men and women to sit together in family groupings. (Not just together one by one, mind you, but in households at least together.)

Where this immorality might lead, who could say – he worried that the whole fabric of Methodist way of life would unravel if men and women sat together. What sign would it send the rest of the world, if the men and women sat together at the Chapel on City Road. What would the world think of us?

He railed in the Journal about how he had been outvoted and remonstrated with the committee. And then a scant couple weeks later, Wesley was happy to report that they had met again and reconsidered, reversing their decision at his urging.

No doubt there would be much more in our Wesleyanism that would cause him greater angst, could he join us today – not least, our separation from the Church of England. And there certainly have been harder controversies – we have in this place two columns gifted by the Methodist-tradition Churches in the United States of America, one from the south, one from the north. Divided over the question of whether Christians could keep slaves, or be slaves. And caring enough about that division to make sure that each gave enough in the campaign to refurbish here that each would be represented. The very fabric of this place, so steeped with prayer, testifies to the sad record of our controversy over how to inhabit the Methodist tradition. This is our heritage.

And yet, this not the kernel of our heritage nor all of it.

In this week in 1791, no doubt prayers were said here for healing, grief shared and comforted, 'But best of all is, God is with us' – in 1791 in this church, I am sure thanksgiving was offered – grace grown, here in that week, the hungry were fed and stranger welcomed.

Evangelical, Social, Grace-Full.

And so the same, this week – despite how much else has changed – 8 of you left here 5.30 AM on Friday and served breakfast at the Whitechapel Mission – over 300 eggs - to homeless Londoners, and in it we felt our own faith renewed in response – and this week, thanksgiving has been offered here for a new child – grief has been shared, grace grown. This is our heritage. Evangelical, social, graceful.

I have heard it said that most important and dangerous word in Methodist vocabulary is all – all may be saved. All must be saved, all may know themselves save. All may be saved to the uttermost.

The unity of Wesleyan tradition has never been about unanimity, nor about preserving a specific church culture, but about the grace of God, and God's evangelical purpose for the church in every age, in each age. This is our heritage.

Now holiness: which is, I remind us, our sole Wesleyan charge – Methodism John Wesley said, was raised up for the spread of scriptural holiness, by the proclamation of the evangelical faith. Always social.

God being with us – in relationship, moving amongst us – and we, belonging to God, coming the shine a little more to stand out in counter cultural ways – holiness is nothing more than the working out of what it means to be in Christ.

Both of our scriptures today speak of the profound holiness, which is God with us – the ‘best of all’ Wesley meant. But not the more recognisable crying baby or even the gentle teacher, or angry prophet, but an undomesticated, mysterious and slightly dangerous God, God catching the corner of your eye and being not right as if we have seen something so outlandish we cannot quite process it. Something in the shining and the cloud that we need to veil to get our head around it at first?

This is holiness – Christ works in our heritage, yes, but the holiness of God with us today does not just recreate temples for our heritage, but shows in behaviours and individuals whose lives catch the eye, who by your service, your questions, your kindness, even at times your righteous anger, shine. This is holiness. And it can be slightly jarring.

If the holiness of today makes you, makes me, entirely comfortable – if we feel like we probably could make a building and house it – then I would say we have not yet seen where God is most truly at work. Corner of the eye ‘did I just see that’ kind of actions, that speak of God with us. That shine.

And we become holy. We ourselves shine, our lives make a little less sense in the world. This is about having an identity defined not just by history, or physical heritage (of controversy or otherwise) but an identity shaped by Grace and formed by prayer. Our baptism is more important than our passport. Water thicker than blood. Surely that is not a surprise?

SO I am not looking, today, to divide out the men and women in our seating – you will be glad to know, as we live as children of John Wesley. And I do not expect much controversy about that. Although that controversy was our heritage, it is not how our holiness shows in the world today.

Heritage, holiness. For our future, this Lent, and these weeks – I believe our scriptures counsel humility.

Both readings speak of an otherworldly, an awesome glorious presence, a shining face – and in the first, we receive not a list of rules, but a Covenant. The Covenant describes a way of being, first principles about how to be together, and how to be with God. And this way of being with God, and with each other, comes as a package of integrated things to do, and not to do for our flourishing.

But this is not what our text seems to find most marvellous, most wonder making and frightening – the people do not go on here about the laws, but about the glory of God come close – best of all is, God is with us.

It is Moses' shining face that makes folk uncomfortable. Such that he, ever the considerate pastor, wears a veil.

And on the mountain with Jesus, when face shines and his robes glow – and they are terrified.

There is, in neither case, Moses in Exodus with the Old Covenant nor Jesus in the Gospels with the new, a set of rules given and then left for us to use on our own as best we can - God is not a blind watchmaker who sets things going and then steps back. Knowing this, to me counsels humility.

This is God with us uncontainable, bound by nothing - Peter tried – 'let us build you a house, indeed, three houses' in what I like to think of as the first Methodist Property subcommittee. The text implies gently that Peter had missed the point entirely, and I have a sense of the others sort of kindly ignoring him, as if letting him have time to catch up – his embarrassment perhaps covered by the voice from heaven, speaking out of the cloud.

Why do we think it would be any different for us, if indeed we do believe that 'best of all is, God is with us.' Humility is our friend here – it reminds us we do not have the full revelation. And that our past heritage, our present way of living in holiness, and future belong to God.

Inhabiting our Wesleyan tradition, it has always been a controversial thing. Adaptive, responsive to the needs and call of the world, which God loves so much.

This past week I had the good luck to go with the Sisterhood, who meet on a Monday afternoon every week, to an immersive multimedia exhibition about the life of Nelson Mandela. 18 of us together on the 76 bus, the one young woman who got on had a moment looking a little scared, if I'm honest - And one of the things we saw was Mandela's Methodist Sunday School attendance card.

And we know that in the depth of the Apartheid era, the Methodist Church in South Africa became a banned organisation, as it refused to cease racially integrated worship. Do we think that all people found this an easy decision, or thought it was worth the risk of armed police attack or arrest, even if they knew the policy to be wrong? Do we think this was without controversy?

There was something fearful, stubborn even – that could not reduce to a rational choice in the way the church responded. But I think the church had the humility to choose a good controversy over which to break itself.

And so this week, the United Methodist Church, the United States, European, and other global sister conferences - has taken another step in division over same sex marriage, it is not a new controversy, goodness knows. And many, especially those of us who don't fit in a traditional man woman loving box are deeply hurt by the implication that this is not us, that somehow this is not Methodist.

I think the Devil dances with glee to see us spend our time arguing over and against folk among us who want to be faithful, lifelong legally covenanted companions. And I say that dispassionately – I wonder what our social impact would be if instead we focused as much on helping all of us live more fruitfully whether single or in relationships, and to make stronger, more resilient and joyful marriages of all kinds rather than preventing some. I wonder what our social impact would be if we focussed on ending the trafficking and sexual exploitation of children, or working that images of violence and sexual violence were less a part of our normal culture. Not to be throwbacks or moralising killjoys, but to recognise that there are better and worse ways to live, and our God in general favours human flourishing.

John Wesley was not known for humility but I choose to think that he was not just a killjoy or unthoughtful relic about men and women sitting together, he had some first-hand knowledge of what heartbreak could do. The harm of relationship gone sour. I think he lacked humility to listen to the developing revelation of his whole flock, that's all.

Heritage, holiness, humility – they are not things we can hold on our own, they do not describe an individual faith but a Body of Christ in whom God is present. And while controversy may be as much a part of our faithfulness as grace, I hope we might have the humility to find better controversies. More meaningful.

The Hebrew people in the wilderness were not sure how to receive God with them as law – the shining of Moses' face – the disciples in Luke were not sure how to receive God with us – Jesus' shining face and glowing robes - early Methodism was no more certain how to receive God with us.

But this heritage should give us a clue, as we tease out what it is to live in holiness, to do so with humility. Perhaps after all this time that the presence of the full awesome creator God in Jesus Christ does not give rise to a set of rules specific to one culture universalised to all, unchanging over centuries, but a Covenant law written in our hearts, a relationship with the Holy Spirit to be renegotiated by word and sacrament, prayer, and justice, and service - ALL for eternal life.

This is my son, the Chosen, listen to him – said the voice from heaven. Best of all is, God is with us – odd, awe-full – glorious – and for all the world.