

26<sup>th</sup> May 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

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Hymns:     **32**    **Meet and right it is to sing**  
              **397**   **The Spirit lives to set us free**  
              **331**   **King of kings, Majesty**  
              **707**   **Make me a channel of your peace**  
              **342**   **All hail the power of Jesu's name**

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Readings:  **Acts.16:9-15**  
              **Revelation 21:10, 22-22.5**  
              **John 14:23-29**

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### **“Open gates, open hearts”**

Let us pray: 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.

Peace I leave with you, Jesus said. My peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid.

There was a woman in the church I trained in, Villa Road Methodist in Birmingham, who had her own take on this verse: she used to shake her finger at us, admonish us - ‘My peace I leave with you, my peace I expect to find when I get back!’

And the women would laugh, and they would all mimic her and shake their fingers back – with a raised mother’s eyebrow that seemed to say ‘...yes, someone’s going to hear about it if Jesus gets home before this mess is cleaned up’.

Rather like a parent returning home to find the kitchen full of mess, water dripping down the light in the hall, and the dog trailing blue paint over white carpet. Not peace, but something else.

Here’s the thing, Jesus didn’t leave his peace like a clean house and go away.

The mess of environmental degradation, poverty, war, information overload – at its most basic it was around in his time too. Empire, and poverty, and brutality – the privileging of folk like Paul, who were Roman

citizens, alongside something like the casual crucifixion of one who looked like a flash in the pan preacher to appease public opinion.

Jesus did not set peace up and leave. Rather, in the midst of what was surely not peace, and still is not peace - he said this SHALOM is your inheritance. Receive it.

Though we believe yes, there will be a day when the kingdom is fulfilled – when the dream language about the Holy City in the Revelation becomes a reality. He did not ever seem to imply that folk had to wait for that day to begin living the Kingdom.

I asked that woman in Birmingham who admonished us with her shaking finger to go a bit further. I said, ‘...that’s not what Jesus said – It doesn’t say ‘my peace I expect to find when I get back, but exactly the opposite, ‘I do not give as the world gives, that is, on condition of good behaviour, or whatever.’

She looked at me with one of those looks that people give student ministers fresh from books and college – ‘yes,’ she allowed, ‘...but we must remember our responsibilities.’

This morning, Sunday the 26<sup>th</sup> of May 2019 is a moment when the promise of peace seems especially attractive – and when the prospect of peace seems as under threat as ever.

And Jesus speaks of it as our inheritance, and I’m not sure how to receive it. How to be responsible for peace, and to peace.

And yet, in our readings we have examples of those who do. Paul, his companions, Lydia the seller of purple – incidentally, the first indigenous European Christian, they clearly have it – this joy, sense of freedom, plenty, and hope?

So I want to see what counsel they might have for me here in London, in May of 2019.

Here we get to open gates, and open hearts. Which run all through the words of Paul, and Lydia, and the Revelation.

Paul first, and Lydia. He goes as a migrant in a small boat across the Aegean Sea, from modern day turkey to Macedonia. To a city Philippi where he is a stranger, and there are not enough Jewish men, it seems,

to form a synagogue. No synagogue, nowhere to worship on the Sabbath. So he goes down through the gates of the city, by the river, where a bunch of women are gathered, perhaps in a prayer house. Lydia is named – which says she's important. And she is a gentile who is observant of the Jewish ways of life – and a householder in her own right, a seller of the luxury good purple.

Open gates. And it says, God opened her heart. As God had rather more forcibly opened Paul's heart, remember.

I think the open heart is fundamental to participating in God's peace.

Open hearts here don't come by our goodness or keeping everything tidy, but as the initiative of God.

Nevertheless, that woman up in Birmingham said she wanted us to remember our responsibilities – well, I think she was right in this way. The open heart may be God's initiative, but friends I think we can practice for it. Can pray for it. Remember, prayer is never about overcoming God's reluctance to get involved, but taking hold of God's willingness? Sometimes we can choose an open heart before we feel it.

I look at Lydia's example, and I see an open heart as an attitude of expectation, and a humility – a listening to the world around without agenda, but to see where God is at work. It seems to me an open heart is by definition an untroubled heart – an unafraid heart. It may be a gift from God, to have an open heart, but I am also convinced we can rehearse for that gift. I think we can practice, rehearse open-heartedness. And we must. Especially in these days.

We can practice open-heartedness, not least by what we do together in church. This wild, counter cultural thing you do each week – to gather and pray, and confess sin, and seek forgiveness, and to break word and bread and build community. Do you realise how odd this is? We do rehearse open heartedness. Like Lydia.

Hard heartedness as Jesus speaks of it, to which we may all also be prone – comes from fear, from experience of hurt, from a defensive hoarding of love, or privilege. To receive an open heart from God is to receive vulnerability.

In Lydia's case, vulnerability to Paul, a migrant stranger, a preacher outside the city gates on the Sabbath. Whom she will very quickly take

into the very heart of her home. And more than that, a vulnerability to the love of God. Remember, as it says in Hebrews, it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.' (10.31) A gracious, joyful thing – a homecoming – but we will be changed.

Lydia was no push over – she is a householder, a business woman - Open heartedness is not passivity, not just being a doormat for the world to walk on. Neither is open heartedness to be confused with being nice.

It is rather about an attitude of mind which is based in the love of God Calvin Samuel spoke about last week – that allows us space for generosity. Open heartedness is powerful.

And, I am convinced, it is closely linked to having a sense of the peace Jesus spoke of. We can practice the one to become more aware of the other.

And if open heartedness, then the open gate. Not just the one Paul went through in Philippi.

It is important that in the description of the heavenly city we heard, the gates are open continually. So secure is the city, so safe, that it has no need ever to close them. There is no night, no moment of attack. No enemy. And remember, this is our city.

I can't hear the story of the heavenly city with its healing trees and living water and open gates without comparing that sense of powerful, unanxious peace with the public anxiety we face right now – the European elections, and news of a new prime minister, and wars and rumours of wars, division between people.

Our gates are not open, we are not that confident. And it would be foolishness to be undefended.

Friends I lock my own door, though my parents never did. But I lock my door knowing that peace, in the end, is not accomplished by building stronger gates and closing them earlier in the day. Protection may be. And protection is no bad thing – but let's not confuse it with peace. I'm going to say that again. Protection is no bad thing, but let's not confuse it with peace.

In 1944, just as the scale of Nazi horror was becoming known in the west, and as the effect of war in Europe, in Africa, in Oceania and the

Pacific was raging, an American theologian called Reinhold Niebuhr gave a series of lectures which led to a book called 'children of light, children of darkness.' It is dated in many ways, but not in its central concern.

He worried that the defenders of liberal democracy were overly sentimental and optimistic, in expecting that democratic freedom could be protected simply because people were good enough and would choose it. He worried that thinkers of his day would underestimate the attraction of oppressive, autocratic, and fascist governments. Protection would be substituted for peace.

Not because folk were nasty, but because folk were scared of chaos. We still are. And because fear sells. Anger sells. It wins votes far more easily than the promise of the hard graft of democracy, which Niebuhr took to be about the open gate, and the open heart. Niebuhr spoke of cynicism, prejudice and social fears, closed gates, as the seedbed of tyranny.

He spoke of the children of darkness as selling this false peace, the children of light as those who would work for something more durable than protection.

I think about gates a lot, because the gates here are never locked – shhhh – don't tell – they are closed, but not locked. Sometimes though, because people think they are locked, they assume they are – and even folks who are expected have been known to stand in the street and wait. Not every gate that looks closed is. Don't believe a gate is locked just because it looks it, or someone else said it was.

We can practice, can rehearse for heaven by opening our gates maybe just a little wider. And seeing who may come in, or even going out ourselves.

It seems to me that open hearts, open gates are a way of rehearsing the peace Jesus spoke of in ways that are deeply personal, and also not just about our private faith. The leaves of the trees by the river in the heavenly city will be for the healing of all the nations.

That's really all I wanted to talk about today – open hearts, open gates - as an antidote for the troubled heart, the unresting anxious spirit. Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you. I do not give as the world gives. Do not let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.

The peace of the lord be always with you.