

14th July 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 1 All people that on earth do dwell
 624 Calm me, Lord, as you calmed the storm
 658 A Charge to keep I have
 503 Love divine, all loves excelling
 662 Have you heard God's voice

Readings: Amos 7:7-17
 Luke 10:25-37

“Who is my neighbour?”

Let us pray: Holy God, break your word as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Silence

What a couple of humdingers we have this week, in our set lectionary readings: Amos and his plumb line and Jesus' answer to that question, 'who is my neighbour.' And over the next 30 or so years, I hope to preach on these texts together at least every three years in the lectionary cycle, that is call it a dozen sermons on these texts, or roughly 240 minutes – and I don't expect to run out of things to say or joy in hearing the stories read. SO – we have at least four hours to go, but only the first few minutes today – for which you may give thanks!

Of course, we'll spend not just a few hours, but our whole lives being fed by this scripture. These stories change the way we live our lives, the way we think of what it is to be British, or British Ghanaian, or American, or whatever. Who is my neighbour, whose neighbour am I? They are about our identity, not just our actions.

The scripture has a way of getting hold of us and becoming present in the way we walk down the street and the way we read newspaper headlines and the way we carry ourselves in bus queues and doctors' surgeries, in shops and parking lots.

Because these are the places where the work of neighbouring is done. And it is what happens in those places that keeps asking that question,

'who is my neighbour.' We'll come back to it, and to Amos. But first, a story.

On my way to Blackpool to be ordained a few years ago – I took a train from Manchester on the Saturday morning, aiming to arrive in time for a late lunch and the big set piece opening of Methodist conference, and address by the then new president, now Superintendent of Methodist Central Hall Westminster and a dear friend, Martyn Atkins.

I always get into trouble on trains, they are Gospel places.

I was feeling holy and not a little self-righteous – I'd actually been reading my Bible, with the result that there were lots of empty seats around me while the rest of the carriage was full – and in came a big group of rowdy men, wild eyed, swears and well lit – a stag do of better than 20 also on their way to Blackpool.

I am not a timid person, and not averse to a good time, and I'm sure they did not mean to be aggressive - but I find groups of loud, drunken men like that frightening.

And they settled around me in the empty seats, with my Bible and worship book.

And around me, a few rows away – folk began to shift in seats and suddenly get very interested in their books.

Who is my neighbour? Leave the men on the train, and me with my Bible for a moment.

Life asks us this question 'Who is my neighbour?' when we come up against a broken place, a division or a place of conflict. The question arises when the normal order and justice of things is disrupted, and we are confronted by a situation out of order, where someone is broken or breaking. God is in that question. The moment when it is asked is holy ground.

It surely arises when a nation colonises another, or asserts its independence, or when a groups of people of different cultures do that radical Gospel thing of thinking they might live together. Answering that question, builds churches like this one.

Lives like ours, be they ever so incomplete. Come and see what God can build if we will ask that question and listen to God's answer! And we don't just ask, and answer it once.

You might want to ask yourself, what in your life is asking this question right now – who is my neighbour.

Let's skip back to Amos for a moment. Amos and his plumb line. Amos was concerned about two things, and they were related:

1. unjust social relationships, especially harm to the vulnerable, the widow, orphan and foreigner, and
2. false worship, where good folks did all the recommended church things but ignored number 1 – his point was that no worship would be acceptable while injustice disordered God's creation.

Let's be clear. Amos was not saying that God is going to 'get us' if we don't stop doing x and start doing y. No. His point was also John Wesley's point, when he moved into the Foundery in 1739 near here, and refused to separate evangelism from serving the needy:

The injustice of impoverished people, of the needy ignored while the temple or church culture grows fat is itself disordering – or to use the illustration that Amos did, it will be like a stone wall built out of true.

Amos held the plumb line not by way of condemnation, but by way of truth-telling – this wall will not stand! No matter how much concrete and how many more bricks! And we who gather to celebrate our identity in Christ, and our identity as Methodists, and some of us as Ghanaians, and some as British, and some as all sorts – and all as loved by God – we know this.

And John Wesley knew it too.

While the foreigner, the needy, the vulnerable are suffering and the life of our worship ignores it, any wall we build will fall. If we try to serve the world, we do not do so because we are good, but because we love God, and we are here.

Because frankly, 'who is my neighbour' is a question I usually find myself asking when I hope the answer one way or another is 'don't worry, NOT the one who you are with now.'

Let's go back to Jesus.

I asked what in your life is asking that question right now.

Just as Amos knew that social injustice, poverty, the real stuff of broken lives distorted society and would shake the very foundations of the world, Jesus knew that he was living in a time of broken social relations too.

The priest and Levite going by, they were not evil – touching the beaten man would have not just inconvenienced or delayed them, but made them ritually unclean and disabled them. This was about their identity, not just their actions. And they were more concerned to preserve their holy identity than to help.

And this Samaritan going by, he wasn't just an outsider or foreigner, the Samaritans were worth fearing. Just before this parable, in Luke's Gospel a Samaritan village denied Jesus a welcome - underscoring the point if it was needed.

Who would be my Samaritan, the one I least expect to help me? Who would be yours? And conversely, what part of my identity would I be willing to put at the disposal of Jesus, if it brought healing?

I think of the racially, politically divided places of our world. Of the difficulties of this City.

Who is my neighbour – it seems to me this lawyer is actually asking 'how far are you asking me to go' when Jesus answers it in reverse – who is it who will help you, when you are in the ditch.

Think about that a moment – when I am thinking 'O God what disreputable person are you going to make me deal with today,' Jesus answers by talking about who will stop for me when I am broken. As if I might be broken, and in need of healing?

God's love for the world, told like this, first exposes and judges the divisions in our lives and society, between races, nations, between individuals. Where they exist, these divisions break us as sure as any robber on the dark path, they disable us as sure as any beating we might take, they can leave us for dead. If you have ever been racially abused, or abused for your gender, or sexuality, or national identity, then you know this.

Who will stop for you, for me when we are in the ditch? God will. God already has, and has given us to one another to stand together. Not because we're nice enough or good enough, or because we all agree, but because God has loved us and we are trying to love God. Come and see what God will build.

Let's finish by going back to the train from Manchester to Blackpool – remember we left me with the drunken men and empty seats all around me, and my Bible.

'Sorry, love' – one slushed to me. 'Wanna drink?' It seemed wise to say yes.

Goodbye smug holiness. I suggested to the men that they could at least offer a drink to the others in the carriage, and quite a few of us: older folk, students, families – more and less willingly - were now celebrating the impending nuptials.

And then, of course, it came out that I was a minister and the groom was produced and I was asked to pray with him, and I did and the whole carriage said Amen.

And so I arrived a little late for the opening worship on Saturday of the Conference where I was to be ordained, and a little tipsy and very definitely humbled and healed from my holy pretension. And my fear, the picture of aggression I had projected onto those men.

Here is good news, and the call as we celebrate the Ghana Fellowship today, and global Methodism, ourselves a part of it.

If we will put ourselves at Jesus' disposal, humbly, together, then come and see what God will build. In our church and in our many nations, and in our life together in this place. Come and see what God will build – John Wesley could never have imagined the graciousness that you all carry, the challenges you face, the walls you have climbed and the people you have saved from the ditch. All of us. But he could have, and did imagine a God who would keep loving us and keep saving us, and a love divine to carry us forward.

So have a good week, and blessings attend us all.