

11th August 2019

Preacher: Jen Smith

Hymns: 55 Immortal, invisible, God only wise
 248 I heard the voice of Jesus say
 155 Come, Holy Ghost, our hearts inspire
 485 When we are living, we are in the Lord
 465 Guide me, O thou great Jehovah

Readings: Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16
 Psalm 30
 Luke 12:32-40

“A better country”

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

‘...But they desired a better country, that is, a heavenly one...’ So says the letter to the Hebrews, talking about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the rest who have gone before us. Not to go back to the land from which they had come, but to find a new homeland: a better country, a heavenly one.

My brother used to work for a satirical media company in the United States called the Onion. It made its name with supposed news stories that called out hypocrisy and ridiculousness in US culture and politics. 25 years later they have not yet run out of material.

Back in 1998, it published a story whose headline ran something like ‘Church rescinds blessed status of meek’.

‘In a historic reversal of its nearly 2,000-year-old pro-meek stance,’ the story read, churches ‘...announced Tuesday that they are permanently rescinding the traditional "blessed" status of the world's meek.’ Complete fiction, of course.

‘Screw the meek,’ A church leader was quoted as saying: Surely the meek understood that their blessed status was ‘...conditional on

inheriting the earth ...an event which seems unlikely to happen anytime in the foreseeable future.'

So the article reports churches re-orienting to attract the more affluent. It is very sharp, and good satire.

But the article builds on a legitimate question: if our God is meant to be for the little ones, the weak ones, the hungry ones, and if our God is meant to be powerful, then what is going on?

How long do we need to wait for the meek to inherit the earth?

Today's Psalm says weeping may endure the night, but joy comes in the morning – and I believe it to be true - but friends the cries of this world extend beyond daybreak.

I'm here to claim it, '...faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen:' but where and when is this kingdom in which we have faith?

Because believing in Jesus is not just a therapeutic thing to make us feel better, though I hope it does. Believing in Jesus involves the recognition of a world changing event. This is the promise at least.

If we think the promise is for the bigger barns and purses of riches today in the way the world counts such things – that is, the affluence of last week, we will be disappointed. But as the scripture reminded us, all these who have gone before us were not looking for power, for victory, for riches as the world measures, but for 'a better country' a heavenly country.

SO the question is, what is this better country? Because it seems to me it is our promise. And if I have been invited to a party, and want to go, and have my dress on and my hair done, I don't want to turn up at the wrong house. What IS the better country?

I want to say it is 'more than here,' 'more than us,' and 'more than now.' More than here, more than us, and more than now.

A better country: more than here.

John Wesley started off his new ministry in the community he knew best, this neighbourhood. Right here where his grandfather had been Rector, and his mother had been born, where he himself had been at school.

When he had nowhere to go, and having tried and failed to be a spiritual hero in Georgia, he came home – to this neighbourhood. They opened the Foundry in 1739, Susanna their mother lived there too - and tried to live out the Gospel. Education, clothing, food, healing, evangelism. And this neighbourhood was a place where many poor lived. Where all the flotsam and jetsam of new arrivals and cast offs in London ended up, not just the Wesleys.

But the 'better country' for John was never just about this neighbourhood, nor was it ever about just this country.

More than here: more than my homeland, more than this country, more than my culture. The letter to the Hebrews calls us to look not to recreate a world that was, or we think was, but to push forward, understanding ourselves always to be to a degree strangers in any country.

God's promise was not waiting for the Methodist or any other missionaries to bring it, it was already loose in the world: more than any 'here.'

The promised better country is wherever any of us are living in such a way, gathering people and telling the story of Jesus and breaking bread such that folk recognise in what we say of Jesus, the truth they already know, the hope they already have. What was already in plain sight. And recognising, begin to share it.

This is what is called evangelism: gathering people, telling the story of Jesus and breaking bread in such a way that all around us recognise questions we have already been living with together, recognise truths we already know. And then when we read the Gospels, they surprise us with their relevance. We are already part of something God is doing.

And our charitable service, builds that other country in the moment – the support given to folk at Whaley bridge this week, or to refugees across this world, or help to one another. It is a sign, a glimpse of the 'better country,' our true home, where the meek do inherit the earth.

More than here. More than any place, more than any country, more than my culture or any culture.

Secondly, more than us.

The author of the letter to the Hebrews is anonymous, and its original hearers were likely to have been Jewish Christians, sometime before the fall of the Temple in Jerusalem in AD 70. These ones who looked for Jesus' return.

But it speaks to Christians across the centuries, and gives an extraordinary encouragement for anyone who has ever felt like giving up. Go home and read the whole chapter – It works through the Hebrew scriptures listing all those who have gone before, and not seen the fulfilment of the promise, yet continued – on behalf of the future.

'All these,' Hebrews says, died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.' This is important. They didn't just keep going blindly, believing 8 impossible things before breakfast, but Abraham and the rest had glimpses – they greeted, or embraced (in the words of the older translations) the promises from a distance.

In his notes on this passage, John Wesley wrote of this embracing or greeting the promises, as if it was embracing as '...one does a dear friend.' Think about that, what a lovely image – when a glimpse of the better country comes, we greet it as if embracing a dear friend. Recognising it, celebrating it.

This is important. Faith as spoken of here is not about being able to con yourself into believing impossible things, but noticing what is possible in God.

Faith is about getting to know and seeing if we can love God – daring to bring our sharpest questions and longing to God – not just for ourselves, but for the world – this is faith. The opposite of faith, I am convinced, is not doubt, but cynicism. Withdrawal.

Faith is living in a creative tension of being able to see, and sometimes embrace the promise of the better country – like a dear friend we already know but perhaps haven't seen in a while.

The better country, the heavenly country: More than here, more than us.

We're not alone, we are part of a long river of folk who have struggled, have lived in this creative tension between the now and the not yet of God's kingdom. Have greeted glimpses of the promise – and been sustained by them.

I think what we do in church prepares our eyes and our ears for the surprise moments of grace. As Jesus says, keep your lamps lit – be ready because the Son of man will come at an unexpected hour! And nothing could be less expected than when the Master comes home, in this little parable we heard today, he greets the servants by sitting them down at table and serving them.

It goes by so quickly in the parable – sometimes don't even notice – Jesus didn't say 'be prepared so you can serve or the Master will be angry,' he said 'be prepared because the Master will return and will want to serve YOU.'

More than us. It is adamantly clear that we are not alone in our questions, or our love of God. We are each part of a deep history. And the most unexpected folk will show us glimpses of the promise of the kingdom. The folk we never ever expect. Who has it been for you, this week? Masters, even, who serve dinner to the slaves.

Finally, the better country, the heavenly country: more than now.

What we do now is important. Especially that we do not live in a cycle of endless preparation that amounts to putting off 'real life.' Whatever that is for you – changing job, beginning a friendship, making peace with someone, getting yourself properly on the electoral roll?

The better country is now, but it is more than now.

What kind of ancestor do you want to be to the generations of children yet unborn?

Thousands of men and women gave life's work to the Leysian Mission, to the Foundery, and to this Chapel – and built what you see and what you do not see – a network, an apprehension of God, a glimpse of grace that has echoes in many places on this earth. Beyond now.

Always, more than now – we are seeking a better country for the future beyond that which any of us here can imagine. A future which is perhaps a twinkle in the eye of the granddaughter of a baby in arms today.

For this future, we have faith. Faith not only in the past, but in God's activity for and in the future. And so considerations like rising sea levels, and species' extinction, and pollution are present Christian matters. Because we seek a better country, a heavenly country.

More than here, more than us, more than now.

Back to the Onion article with which we started. I'm cheered that the writers were so theologically literate, and assumed their readers would also be so theologically literate. It is only funny if you know what the scripture says and what churches say they believe. And only sad because people want the meek to inherit – because we want it to be so. This longing for the kingdom is not owned by people who call themselves Christian. And so, in glimpses, moments, the meek do inherit the earth, moment by graceful moment.

Not because the church says so or doesn't say so, but because the son of man comes at the unexpected hour – and serves the ones who were waiting.

Even this hour, here, now, with us. This is still news, and the news is good.