

Wheatley United Reformed Church
Sunday 2 February 2025 – Epiphany 4 (Year C)
Jer.1.4-10; Ps 71.1-6; 1 Cor 13.1-13; Luke 4.21-30

When sermons enrage

Have you ever heard a sermon that made you angry or hurt? In my experience they are very rare, but I do remember coming out of church a few times – here only once – feeling aggrieved and upset at what the preacher said, because the sermon seemed to me moralistic and smug, instead of filled with the radical grace of God. It's a temptation from which none of us is immune, that shaping of the Gospel to fit our own views, instead of allowing the Gospel to reshape us and them.

Last week we heard about the first sermon Jesus preached, in his home village of Nazareth. Mark explained how Jesus had been given the scroll and found a passage in Isaiah about good news for the poor, the captives and the blind. Everyone's eyes were on him. When he told them that this prophecy was coming true, there and then, they were amazed that such words could come from a local boy, known to them all, the son of a carpenter and his wife. That was Part 1. But today, Part 2 of the narrative veers off in an unexpected and violent way. Jesus seems to read their minds. I know what you're thinking, he says. 'Who are you to make such claims? Sort yourself out first before you start preaching to us. And let's have some miracles, like the ones we've heard you performed in nearby Capernaum. We might listen to you then.' Well, Jesus continues, prophets are never popular in their own country. Maybe he's thinking of Jeremiah, who tells us he was called by God before he was even born and gets into trouble time and time again for speaking the truth to power. Or Elijah, running for his life from the wrath of Jezebel and Ahab. The Hebrew Scriptures are full of such examples.

Worse is to come, because what he says next enrages them so much that they kick him out of the synagogue with the intention of pushing him to his death off a high cliff. What has made them so angry? Jesus has told them a home truth that they don't want to hear. He has told them from their own Scriptures about a God whose mercy and love extends beyond the boundaries of a chosen people. Apparently the Bible is fine as long as it tells you what you want to hear, but not if it doesn't - which happens

quite often, especially when prophets are in full flow. Jesus reminds his hearers of two stories they know well about the prophets Elijah and Elisha, but draws out of them a lesson which is very uncomfortable. Both were sent by God to help people who lived outside the boundaries of Israel and belonged to different cultures and religions – a starving widow in Sidon, and a leprous army commander in Syria. To drive the point home, he tells them that there were plenty of widows in Israel during that famine and plenty of lepers too, but God nonetheless sent his servants on a mission of mercy elsewhere. They don't want to hear that. They want a God who looks after them, not foreigners. Jesus has touched a very raw nerve. It is one which is just as raw in our world, if not more so, than it was then.

Of course our first duty of concern is for those closest to us. - our families, friends, local communities, and the organisations like churches to which we belong. We spend almost all our time with them and they are where we most often put into practice - or try to – the teachings of Jesus, about the need for forgiveness and acceptance and the call to exercise compassion and healing, when the strains and stresses of everyday life take their inevitable toll. It's never easy because it goes against the grain. When we are hurt our first instinct is to strike back, even at those we love the most. But something goes wrong when we make this our exclusive concern and deny others the rights and the opportunities which we cherish for our own people. Is Jesus being deliberately controversial? Maybe. But he is speaking with the word of God from Scripture, and sometimes its sharpness hurts.

I have decided to make a sacrifice when Lent comes. I am going to stop mentioning Donald Trump in my sermons. He may make that difficult but I will try to keep my resolution. Meanwhile, as it isn't Lent yet, I feel liberated and he will now make a guest appearance. Mariann Edgar Budde is the Episcopalian bishop of Washington DC who preached at the National Prayer Service before the inauguration of President Trump. She used the opportunity to speak of some of the fundamental teachings of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. She spoke of the need for Americans to find and cherish what unites them beyond their political differences. She said that the rhetoric of contempt was not a good way to govern a country. She spoke of the fear and hurt people in immigrant and transgender communities were feeling, of children afraid that

their mothers would be taken from them, and she asked for the new President to show mercy to them. It was courageous, dignified and yes, quite pointed. You could tell from the faces on the front row that this did not go down well. Afterwards, President Trump tweeted: ‘The so-called Bishop who spoke at the National Prayer Service was a Radical Left hard line Trump hater. She was nasty in tone, and not compelling or smart...She and her church owe the public an apology’. He called her ‘very ungracious, not very good at her job.’ I have read her sermon a number of times. I can’t see in it anything but the Jewish law which commands us to love our neighbours, the voice of the prophets who define true religion as the care of widows and orphans, and the teaching of Jesus about the way we deal with other people, especially outsiders – treat everyone as you would like to be treated yourself. Does that make me a radical left hard-line Trump-hater? Or you, should you agree with what I’ve said about bishop Budde’s sermon? I must confess I’ve never thought of you or me in those terms. But I’m glad he was angry, because it exposes how limited an understanding of the Christian faith he has. I am glad a petition has been launched in support of Bishop Budde, because she knew what the reaction would be and stayed true to the Gospel.

The congregation in the Nazareth synagogue that Sabbath was enraged. Donald Trump was angry and fell back on his usual habit of insulting people with whom he disagrees. Neither of those responses seems to me appropriate for people of faith when confronted with biblical teaching which touches the raw nerve in us. Jewish and Christian and Islamic tradition call us to extend our duty of care beyond the boundaries of family, home and nation because God’s love is universal, not particular, and we don’t earn it, we can only open ourselves out to receive it. In the Times last Saturday, Qari Asim, an imam in Leeds, wrote: ‘We know all too well what demonisation of the ‘other’ can lead to. Unless we believe an attack on the dignity, freedom and security of any one group of people is an assault against all of us, the consequences will be dreadful for us, and we will not be able to escape the deep stain on our collective moral conscience’. He wrote those words, knowingly, at the time of the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau, where over a million Jews, including some of my own relatives, Roma, homosexuals and others

were exterminated by an ideology which preached the superiority of one race over all others and justified thereby the extermination of precious human beings who happened to be different. If you watched the ceremony, you will have heard one of the survivors say simply: 'Hatred only begets more hatred'. The murderous Hamas attack on Israel in October 2023 and the appalling slaughter in Gaza which has followed can only breed hatred and more destruction and weeping and loss. We've seen it in our own streets in Southport last summer after the tragic murder of those three little girls, when false rumours spread on social media and citizens of this country thought it appropriate to attack the police, destroy property, and try to burn down buildings where asylum-seekers were living. Terrorists: learn this lesson. Politicians: learn this lesson. Hatred only begets more hatred. Don't claim God is on your side and then break time and again the fundamental commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself. And remember that when Jesus was asked who exactly one's neighbour might be, he told a story in which those who were supposed to be neighbours failed to help someone in need and someone who was regarded as an outsider to be shunned stepped in and did the job. There is a consistency here about his teaching, because it encourages us to disregard the boundaries which we wrongly imagine are there to keep others out.

And if you think I've spent too much time on the politics of the moment, it's because it matters to each of us. Remember that the whole point of this season of Epiphany is that God's light is given for the whole world, not favoured bits of it, and that there's no one and nowhere which does not fall under judgment when people try to limit it or deny it to those who need it. Each Sunday as our worship begins, we light a candle and hear a verse of Scripture. That candle is a sign and symbol for us of God's light shining in Christ amid the darkness of the world. Today is Candlemas, a festival of light. It is also the Feast of the Presentation, when Mary and Joseph brought their new-born child to the Temple to make the customary offerings, and an old man and an old woman saw the child and recognised the light which was to shine from him. When people use religion to box us in and demean others they betray it. For the light of Christ is given to us to open us out – open us out to the God who time and time again challenges every kind of injustice, every form of prejudice and persecution and

whose light will always expose their evil and arouse their anger. For us, that means letting the Gospel form our response to all the social and political problems of our time, instead of bending the Gospel to serve our self-centred desires. And the only way I know to do that is to study it, share it, pray it and live it. And that can only happen when we allow the light of God time and space to shine in our hearts and minds and inspire them to work towards that better and fuller life which is God's gift to us in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Prayers 02 02 25

‘Let there be light.’

Come, power of the Creator God,
awaken in us wonder at the worlds you have made.

Come, wisdom of the Christ,
inspire our searching for the truth
and our longing for peace.

Come, love from the Holy Spirit,
bind together our divisions and heal our hurts.

Come, light of Creator, Christ and Spirit,
shine through the words we hear
and the words and actions we share,
and lift us up into your life-giving presence.

Amen.

‘Let there be light.’

Your light, the light of God, shines in our darkness
But we struggle to see it.

Too often clouds obscure it -
our limited vision, our careless assumptions,
the anger we express and the fear we dare not name,
which come between us and you.

Too often we cannot see it
in the darkness of our times:
our wars and our ingrained injustices,
the pain and suffering of so many,
and we lose all hope.

Forgive us, holy and gracious God,
that we are so blind to your light
and prefer to walk in familiar darkness.

Lord, have mercy upon us.....

Know this, that with God there is forgiveness
when we turn to Jesus Christ, who said:

I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me
will never walk in darkness but have the light of life.’

Follow him and learn to live again. Amen.

Dismissal

May you wonder at the power of the Creator
May the wisdom of the Christ fill your hearts and minds,
May the love which flows from the Spirit
hold you in warm embrace.

And the blessing.....