

Altrincham United Reformed Church
Sunday 25th May 2014 Trinity Hale 10.45 a.m.

Worship led by Jim McKnight
Pianist David Marden

EXTRACT FROM SERVICE:

(Why this extract? Normally I would not publish my sermons; I am just a lay preacher who continues to give limited service in the Greater Manchester area. But this occasion was unique. Our church was undergoing a major “refit”, and as a result for a while services were held in the church hall, which had originally been the chapel of the original church. It had been decided to borrow a nice table from the Guild for the services, few had realised it was actually the communion table from the original chapel. The church was in the process of commemorating the centenary of the outbreak of WWI, having planted poppies in the church grounds. It was known the church had been a WWI hospital, but the details were vague. And the reading for the week fitted into some views I have about sacrifice. But the basic theme was let’s re-ignite the fervour held by the founders of the church, who were not afraid of change.)

1 PETER Chapter 3:12-22

¹²For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those who do evil.”

¹³Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?

¹⁴But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear,^[b] and do not be intimidated,

¹⁵but in your hearts sanctify Christ as Lord. Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you;

¹⁶yet do it with gentleness and reverence. Keep your conscience clear, so that, when you are maligned, those who abuse you for your good conduct in Christ may be put to shame.

¹⁷For it is better to suffer for doing good, if suffering should be God’s will, than to suffer for doing evil.

¹⁸For Christ also suffered¹ for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you^[c] to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit,

¹⁹in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison,

²⁰who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water.

²¹And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you—not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ,

²²who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.

Reflection

The next hymn, number 511, “O love that will not let me go”, is special to me. I’ve got it in my mind as my favourite hymn, and I’m not sure why. I love the tune, and I guess it was the first verse that helped me through a difficult time a while back. The origin of the hymn is interesting.

It was written by George Matheson, a Scottish minister on the night of his sister’s marriage. Years before, he had been engaged, until his fiancée learned that he was going blind—that there was nothing the doctors could do—and she told him that she could not go through life with a blind man. He went blind while studying for the ministry, and his sister had been the one to care for him through the years, but now she was gone. He was now 40, and his sister’s marriage brought a fresh reminder of his own heartbreak. It was in the midst of this circumstance and intense sadness that the Lord gave Matheson this hymn.

Matheson said about it:

“My hymn was composed in the manse of Innelan [Argyleshire, Scotland] on the evening of the 6th of June, 1882, when I was 40 years of age. I was alone in the manse at that time. It was the night of my sister’s marriage, and the rest of the family were staying overnight in Glasgow. Something happened to me, which was known only to myself, and which caused me the most severe mental suffering. The hymn was the fruit of that suffering. It was the quickest bit of work I ever did in my life. I had the impression of having it dictated to me by some inward voice rather than of working it out myself. I am quite sure that the whole work was completed in five minutes, and equally sure that it never received at my hands any retouching or correction.

I have no natural gift of rhythm. All the other verses I have ever written are manufactured articles; this came like a dayspring from on high.”

Hymn 511. O love that will not let me go

Tune: St Margaret

O Love that wilt not let me go,
I rest my weary soul in thee;
I give thee back the life I owe,
That in thine ocean depths its flow
May richer, fuller be.

O light that followest all my way,
I yield my flickering torch to thee;
My heart restores its borrowed ray,
That in thy sunshine's blaze its day
May brighter, fairer be.

O Joy that seekest me through pain,
I cannot close my heart to thee;
I trace the rainbow through the rain,
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be.

O Cross that liftest up my head,
I dare not ask to fly from thee;
I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.

Sermon.

“I lay in dust life's glory dead,
And from the ground there blossoms red
Life that shall endless be.”

That hymn was written in 1882. How is it that the last verse predicts the awful postscript to World War One? The fields of Flanders poppies?

What has it to do with a blind man's temporary depression? It was a hymn, he said, given to him by the Lord.

You might have those words in mind when our planted poppies bloom.

Let us pray: - O God, light of the minds that know you, life of the souls that love you, and strength of the hearts that seek you - bless the words of my lips and the meditations of our hearts.

We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen

My text today is from the reading we have just heard:

“For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous,
and his ears are open to their prayer.

But even if you do suffer for doing what is right, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear, and do not be intimidated,”

We have now embarked on commemorating the centenary of World War 1. I'm sorry, but there is four and a half years of centenaries still to come. We haven't even reached the centenary of the start of WW1, and be sure, every single event in that war will be remembered. We have already been told, that after a century of careful thought, a) we shouldn't have gone to war and b) we were right to go to war. Don Snow has told us

that life in the trenches wasn't all that bad, only one in eight were killed. Tell that to my uncles who were on the Somme.

And yet, last year, we in this church, missed an important centenary of our own, for on 2th October 1913, this room ceased to be the place of worship, when everybody moved into the new church. It is nice to speculate how this area was laid out for services. Was that place over there the chancel, or was it where the organ was? I'm sure it was the chancel. You know that in the round room there remains the frame of a doorway through that wall. I like to think that the minister started the service in the manner of a Greek Orthodox Priest, by bursting through it. Sheer speculation.

It was on May 31st 1897 when a committee first met to build a new church in Hale. It was set up by the Bowdon Downs church because they were worried that people in Hale were reluctant to walk as far as Bowdon to worship. The building committee wasted no time in providing a School Chapel which opened on May 4th 1899, costing £4500. It serves to remind us that at that time one third of child education was in the hands of the churches.

In 1902 the Balfour Act was passed by parliament putting education under local education authorities, it allowed for funding only of Anglican and Catholic schools, the non-conformists were left out to great anger. It cost the Conservative government the election.

But were the Hale Congregationalists down hearted? Well maybe, but at that time attendance at Sunday schools (which often met mid-week as well) was actually higher than at day schools. The building committee reformed in 1909 as the extensions committee and set about building an annex called the New Schools. This was a two story building, sadly no longer with us. It consisted of three departments, primary, junior and senior, each accommodating from eighty to a hundred children. It opened in April 1911 and cost £3700. There seemed to be a surplus of cash left over from building the schools and the extensions committee moved onto constructing the new church which opened, as I said, in October 1913. The local paper reported that of the cost £5500, £200 remained outstanding, but this was liquidated during the opening ceremonies. This part of the church was demoted to the status of lecture hall.

There were adjustments to be made. An American organ was brought in here whilst the pipe organ was moved to the new church and upgraded from a two to a three manual. It was provided with an electric pump which proved to be unnecessarily noisy. The man who had been paid to pump the organ was now paid to run the cloak-room on Sundays. The ladies busied themselves with putting a carpet around the new communion table; it took four months to decide the colour. It was grey.

The extensions committee remained in place to sort out turning this room into a lecture hall. They were still trying to give away the old pulpit and font when war broke out and they ceased meeting. We do know what happened to the communion table. This had been given to the chapel when it opened in 1899 by a member of the parent church, Bowdon Downs. In 1914 it was returned there. When the Downs church closed it was given to Trinity Presbyterian church in Bowden – this was a couple of years before the union – and when this church joined with Hale, it came back here. Here it is, the centre of worship, where it belongs. It has one peculiarity, it may seem a nice uniform oval, but it actually has no axis of symmetry at all. This is because the carvings show thirteen faces evenly spaced around the table. Thirteen is a prime number.

The Ashley Road, Hale Congregational church didn't have long to settle into their new premises. In August 1914, after Britain had declared war on Germany on the 4th, the Red Cross, which had joined with the Order of St John, immediately approached the church with the intention of converting the schools into a hospital for war wounded, and these were handed over in November 1914. The adjacent St Peter's Assembly rooms were also taken over in December. It must have irked the Anglicans somewhat to have the combined hospital listed as The Congregational Schools Red Cross Hospital, Hale. The church had to accommodate the Sunday School children, about 130 of them, in the main church and the vestries. The ladies made a special arrangement with the hospital so that they could still make use of the kitchen; it seemed that when tea was required by the church, the hospital staff made it.

This was just one of thirteen similar hospitals in the Altrincham area. Now this at once tells us something about World War I. The popular idea is that we weren't ready for war, that when it came, "it would be all over by Christmas", and that when the horrors of the trenches started the people at home were kept in the dark. We now know that the Prime Minister Asquith had predicted a long war and a high casualty rate, and when war was declared preparations were already in hand for high numbers of wounded as you heard. And

these hospitals, which were staffed by local civilian volunteers, would learn at first hand from these soldiers what they had gone through in the trenches and pass it on. It can't have been a secret.

I have been talking about the efforts of people who worked hard together for the community in this area, driven by a need to serve God. They built this church, starting with schools for hundreds of children. Then, they gladly gave over the building for war wounded. They were a dynamic group, ever looking for fresh challenges. There will have been doubts and criticisms, but I am sure they were well aware of Peter's words, "For the eyes of the Lord are on the righteous... even if you do suffer for doing what is right"

It is hard to tell at this distance quite how people felt then, but it seems clear they approached a dangerous situation with fortitude. They must have been afraid of the outcome of the war. Unlike the second world war, when air raids brought danger to most people, in the first world war it was in hospitals like these that the horrors of war were brought home. And there was that endless fear of seeing the telegram boy coming to your house, to announce another lost soul. Now we also live in a changing world marked by terrorism, wars, and the constant threat of nuclear, biological or chemical extinction. But praise God, whatever fearful situation we may face; there are biblical immutables that are forever the same: We must fight fear by anchoring our lives in this truth: Our MASTER never changes, our MESSAGE never changes, and our MISSION never changes. What is urgently needed today is an re-anointing of the Holy Spirit to relate our foundational unchanging gospel to the fearful changing world in which we live.

Of course people were afraid. And when you face times of suffering, you will respond either like an egg or like a potato. (*pause*) "A potato goes into boiling water hard, but comes out pliable. An egg goes into the boiling water soft and comes out hard" (Anonymous). I'm not sure if its best to be soft or hard!

Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good? (v. 13)

Peter asks a rhetorical question. When Peter asks "Who is there?" he is calling for the reader to think of specific people. Peter is not asking the reader to think of specific people who might try to harm them. He is asking them to think of specific people who would actually try to harm them. Real danger.

Peter is basically telling the reader, "If you do what is right no one can really harm you." In other words, as we see in verse twelve, "the Lord is against those who do evil "no real harm can come to the person who has the eyes of the Lord watching them. No real harm can come to the believer who has God's ear listening to his or her prayers.

The Apostle Paul agreed with Peter on this point when he said in Romans 8:31, "what then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who is against us?" King David felt the same kind of assurance when he wrote in Psalm 56:4, "In God, whose word I praise, in God I have put my trust; I shall not be afraid. What can mere man do to me?"

All this seems rather strange. But what I am saying is, if we do what God wants, never mind the criticism, the insults, the walking away from responsibility, we are doing the right thing and God will support us.

But hold on: what use was this sentiment in the trenches? After all, didn't Christ suffer and die, just for doing good? And yet we celebrate this as a great victory. "For Christ also suffered for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, in order to bring you¹ to God. He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit," Ah, Now we see that earthly suffering will be compensated for in the after life. If you believe your victory over evil will be absolute.

This particular passage of Peter's settles in my mind two problems I have had with redemption.

The first is a biblical matter. If Christ died to save us all, and the requirement is a belief in Christ, what about those poor souls who died before Christ? Or those who die never having heard of Christ? Peter makes an oblique reference to the spirits in prison, wrongdoers from long ago, the time of Noah, no less. James is actually more specific. After the crucifixion there was a delay of three days before the resurrection. Three days, after which devout Jews believed there could be no return from death. We are told that Jesus went into

Hades, preached the gospel there, and some believed and were redeemed. As for those who were ignorant of Jesus, well, he did die for all, every one of us. And for all of us, there is still the final judgement to come. The second problem I have had actually brings us full circle back to the theme of world wars.

Some years ago, it must have been some world war anniversary; a letter was published in the Guardian. It was from a vicar in the Midlands who challenged the idea that those who died in the war would necessarily go to heaven. Not all of those who died in the trenches, he said, were worthy of going to heaven. What disturbed me was that I knew the guy from University. He flew in the University Air Squadron with me, and went on to be a fighter pilot during National service. He married a close friend of mine. But our paths then parted, and we lost track of each other. And I disagreed heartily with that sentiment. Surely, surely, dying because of other people's faults must gain you some Brownie points? But as our reading tells us, Christ died not just for the righteous, but also the unrighteous.

This is a reminder that for all our faults, Christ is with us always, waiting for our faith in him. When forgiveness can be total.

So now let us consider again those worthy people who built this church. They didn't do it for themselves, they did it for other people. And there will have been many who thought they were foolish. They did it primarily to educate the young. And somehow they also managed to have oversight of a chapel in Mobberley, (I didn't mention that! even today that seems a long way away.) They established a new community of Christians that has survived over a hundred and fifteen years. Today, we have a new buildings committee, determined to renew, to revive our place in the community.

I wonder what the old building and extensions committee, continually active for 17 years, would have made of it. They would have agreed that a church is not a museum of the past, but a springboard for the future. I'm sure that with continued commitment we can go on for another hundred years. Of course there is criticism, of course there are doubters, but as Peter said "Now who will harm you if you are eager to do what is good?"

So let us look forward to the future and make the most of our resources. Christ never lets us down, if we but try.

I finish with these words from Peter: "But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

Amen to that.