

Hymns: **506** **“My heart is full of Christ, and longs”**
 511 **“Speak in the stillness, God we pray”**
 507 **“O for a heart to praise my God”**
 345 **“And can it be that I should gain”**

Reading: **Ezekiel 2:9-3:11**
 Mark 12:28-34

“HAVE A HEART”

I thought I'd organise an easy run through August – it is a holiday month after all. I planned to do three sermons on almost successive Sundays. They'd be about loving God with all our heart (week 1), with all our mind (week 2), and with all our strength (week 3). I've done them all before – it would only need a little twist here and there and, bingo! We'd leapfrog over August into September.

Then came my epiphany last Friday. I was showing two people around parliament and, in the course of conversation at two separate moments I heard the following two sentences. Firstly, “the Church used to be at the heart of our communities.” And then, some minutes later, the second: “the Church was once the beating heart of our nation.”

These words were spoken in the Throne Room where there are five paintings by William Dyce inspired by the supposed virtues of the court of King Arthur. The pictures portray Courtesy, Religion, Generosity, Hospitality, and Mercy. I think these would make fine virtues in today's world as much as in our fictional past.

This combination of external stimuli opened my eyes and suddenly I knew I must change my tack for today's sermon. I could no longer address the subject “Love God with all your heart” as if it was addressed to (and simply concerned) an individual; as if it were merely a psychoanalytical piece of analysis. I knew I had to ask the question at a corporate collective level. Can the Church, can the Christian faith, ever again be at the heart of our communities? Can they ever be the beating heart of our nation? Although the passage we've heard is addressed to a single individual, the young lawyer, might it just be possible that Jesus intended a more general application in his exchange with that young man?

The scripture doesn't say so, so I'm on dangerous ground. But this is what I felt challenged to so say after my Friday experience. We preachers are good at exhorting our people, individually, to get their act together. We're hot on morality, on how to behave, on what's right and wrong. We're not always so good with the big picture. So I'm going to be brave this morning. “Love God”, it says. And the verb, in Greek is singular. “Love God”, is what I want to preach on but I want to suppose that the verb is

plural. You (plural) shall love God with all your heart oh, and by the way, don't forget to love your neighbour as yourself. Only then will our communities come alive and our nations rediscover their energies.

So why am I prepared to treat the scripture in this manner? Because the Church, far from being at the heart of our communities or showing a heart for our groaning world seems beset with discourtesy, a travesty of religion, a lack of generosity, inhospitable behaviour and a no-mercy disposition. In other words, the diametrical opposite of the virtues that illustrate the court of King Arthur. Love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself? Yes. But too often that's not what we see.

All this came to me on Friday. Friday's newspaper contained a number of stories that indicate where the heart has gone out of our communities, where our nation seems no longer to have a beating heart. Let me quote four stories from that newspaper.

- A. The world of politics – a new party leader is needed in British politics. The country is in need of intelligent debate. These are bewildering times and we need wise leadership. So what kind of debate do we get? One that involves character assassination, grand-standing, yelling insults. We seem to have lost the art of debate, the art of conversation. Can the Church play a useful role? Can it introduce respect, courtesy, generosity of spirit as our generation searches for a new political discourse? How can the Church avoid offering a mere mirror-image of the political scene?
- B. The Roman Catholic Church is bracing itself for its October Synod. The debates will be on questions relating to the family – marriage, sexual identity and the like. In the run up to that Synod there is mutual denigration to be heard as one side of the debate seeks to put down the other. “A defiance of God”, the gay-hating faction declares. And their objections are met with similar thin-lipped replies. How can it possibly be that this subject, for all its importance, should rise to the top of the agenda so consistently in this way? There's a world committing suicide all around us, refugee camps are full, people are fleeing, floods and earthquakes ravage the globe, - and we want to tear ourselves to pieces on questions relating to sexual orientation and practice. Can this be right? Does it suggest a Church at ease with itself? Does it point to a body of people capable of being at the heart of our communities, offering a beating heart for our nation?
- C. Then what about this wonderful quotation from that same newspaper? “This past weekend, a massive photograph of Cecil the lion inspired a global out-pouring of grief when it was projected onto the Empire State Building. Cecil, you may remember, was the beloved animal whose illegal death at the hands of a dopey American dentist caused such sadness around the world. The installation of this display was part of a campaign to raise awareness about endangered animals. It struck a sour, nearly satirical cord with many people in the USA. “I'm personally going to start wearing a lion costume when I leave my

house so if I get shot, people will care” wrote one observer. As many writers of colour have already pointed out, there has been no memorial on the side of the Empire State Building for the black and American victims of police violence. It is an objective fact that police officers hunting people is a more pressing social issue than dentists hunting lions. I think the point needs no further illustration.

- D. And then there’s the thorny question of immigration. Why can’t we have this debate without demonising the poor people who are seeking to find other places to live? We can grant that there needs to be some kind of control of population movements but do we really have to discuss as if those on the move were animals or beasts or robots or something. And how can our Prime Minister berate the rest of Europe for not relieving the pressure on Calais when he himself has refused to lift a finger to help the people of Italy and Greece? From the same Friday edition of my newspaper came a proposal to open an immigration museum to highlight the problem of people on the move. There were pictures of makeshift churches built particularly for Ethiopians and Eritreans at Calais. They do, after all, worship God – the same God as we worship – they are our brothers and sisters in Christ. And then, finally, there was the story of the building of a fence along the whole of the border between Hungary and Serbia to prevent people coming across that particular border. The dam will one day burst. The ramparts will one day fall. We should note that most of the desperate people on the run are not looking for a cheap and easy future. They’ve left wives and children at home. They’ve promised to do their best to find sustenance for them. Those depleted families are praying night after night for the safety of their loved ones. How do I know? Because I’ve dealt with this problem on a first-hand basis during the years I’ve been working on Haitian problems.

So how does the Church, purveyor of good news, put the heart back into society? How does it refocus these critical debates? How does it exhibit a love for God expressed from the heart?

Methodism was not only born in song; it was born out of a heart-warming experience. That was John Wesley. When his brother sought to explain his conversion he did it in verse. “My chains fell off”, he wrote, “my heart was free; I rose, went forth, and followed thee.”

The love with which we have been loved is the love that we must show towards others. For if we don’t show that love to our neighbour:

- the member of the other political party;
- the black people fearful of the police;
- gay people doing their best to add value to society;
- migrants seeking a better life,

if we can't find a way to love the least of our brothers and sisters, how can we say that we love Christ?

And if we can't find a way to love these our neighbours, if necessary (as in John Wesley's case) "to submit to become more vile", then people will be entitled to suppose that since we don't seem to be able to love our neighbour who we see there may be so real questions about whether we can love God whom we don't see.

I want to end by reference to Allen and Harriet Birtwhistle. We're delighted to have their families here today and later we'll bury Harriet's ashes in the vicinity of Allen's in our memorial garden at the back of the Chapel. This was a couple that worked so hard to ensure a continuing life for this Chapel. They were not treated well in their day. Without them there would be no Wesley's Chapel now – they travelled the world and worked their socks off in order to raise the money to re-build and re-furbish this place. Yet on the day of the opening of the Chapel, they were both marginalised. Harriet wasn't even at the opening – she was facing a class of boys at the local high school. We can only thank God for them even as we express our shame at the way they were treated. Let their buried ashes speak eloquently to future generations of the work they did to keep this place alive.

Alive, I said. And how! Here we are at the heart of a community they could never have envisaged. This was a down-at-heel neighbourhood. Now it's the very epicentre of cutting edge technology, the looked-for place for high jinks at weekends on the part of young people in the nightclubs, a few yards up the road from the financial sector and its great motors of economic activity. We are at the heart of a community, a vibrant community. And we have opportunities we must not waste.

For we may be at the heart of this community but we must work to become its beating heart – reaching out to its hurting ones, building trust and mutual respect, healing and helping those in need, announcing good news to all, a refuge, a solace, a safe place, a beacon shining in dark times.

Harriet and Allen Birtwhistle did the best things in the worst times and hoped them in most calamitous. And they have given us our chance to love God with all our hearts and, in loving our neighbour, to put that love into practice as we reach out to our community. If we manage to do all this then (and only then) may we talk about loving God, loving God with all our heart. And then, with Charles Wesley we can rejoice:

*Bold, we approach the eternal throne
And claim the crown through Christ our Lord.*

That's our mandate. That's the direction of travel. Let's make sure we do it.

Amen.