
Hymns: **16** **“We give immortal praise”**
 611 **“Brother, sister, let me serve you”**
 432 **“O the bitter shame and sorrow”**
 516 **“What shall I do my God to love”**

Readings: **James 3:13-18 & 4:7-8a**
 Mark 9:30-37

“LESS IS MORE”

Last Tuesday, I attended a funeral. It did not take place just round the corner. In fact, it needed a 250 mile journey to get to Tavistock to pay my last farewells to the Revd Dr Ronald Gibbins, one of my predecessors as Superintendent of Wesley’s Chapel. He came to the Chapel from the East End Mission which, in those days, was a mighty fortress for Methodism in London. And he came to a broken-backed cause that might (or might not) be resurrected. The Chapel had risked falling down in the early 1970s but, after a mighty effort to raise funds, it was refurbished and strengthened and, finally, re-opened in the presence of Her Majesty the Queen in November 1978. The membership had fallen to 25. Ron Gibbins knew that he would be up against it. He’d left a successful show to come to a struggling cause. He set his sights on a worshiping pattern centred on Holy Communion and founded a Religious Community. He spent endless hours travelling around the world to raise funds. And the result of all his efforts? He took the membership from 25 to 96. Ten years to achieve that result – it seemed very meagre.

Ron was buried on a very suitable day – it just happened to be the 75th anniversary of the Battle of Britain. During the Second World War, Ron had been one of a dozen men getting a Lancaster bomber fit and ready for service. Whilst they were at work, a fighter plane, returning damaged from a sortie, veered off course on the runway and collided heavily with the bomber. There was a huge conflagration and only two of the working party survived. Ron was one of them. He spent many months in hospital and underwent multiple surgical procedures. He suffered dreadful burns which disfigured him and made it difficult to blink his eyes or to use his hands with any flexibility.

When I think of Winston Churchill’s famous remark: “never was so much owed by so many to so few,” I invariably think of Ron Gibbins as one of “the few”.

And that particular saying could just as easily be applied to Jesus and his disciples. In their case too, we can confidently say that “never was so much owed by so many to so few”. But before that slogan could fit the friends of Jesus they had to learn a lesson.

It was a hard lesson; it goes against the grain of human experience and expectation. It states that true strength doesn’t come from simply wielding power, it isn’t about being great or greater or even greatest. Truth doesn’t come (*pace* Mao Tse-tung)

from the barrel of a gun. Nor is it the product of fame or celebrity – too often vacuous and hollow states of being. Not at all. None of these. True strength comes from a readiness, a capacity, to put oneself at the disposal of others, to see service as the highest possible vocation, to feel the deep freedom that gives you permission to offer yourself in love. This option, choice, vocational direction, may need courage. It may bring hardship. It may raise difficulties. It will certainly demand faith in a God who will not let us down.

To make this point, Jesus took a child in his arms. It was a vivid illustration of what he wanted to say. We are accustomed to the say that “a photograph is worth a thousand words”. Well so was a gesture like this one. The child taken by Jesus into his arms was defenceless, dependent, weak. It illustrated the point Jesus wanted to make. He urged his listeners who’d been squabbling shabbily amongst themselves to focus on defencelessness, dependency, weakness, - all attributes of the child he was holding. And he encouraged his friends to see the people who embodied such attributes as heirs to the kingdom of heaven. They should be received in his name, with honour and respect. Less can sometimes be more

Just yesterday I got an email that asked me to write a 400 word account of an experience I underwent just a couple of weeks ago. The request came from the CEO of the Boys’ Brigade. I am so proud to be the President of the Boys’ Brigade, an organisation which, nationwide, offers its services to 50,000 young people and counts on the best efforts of over 15,000 officers and helpers. The deadline was “immediate”! So I sat down before composing my thoughts for this sermon and dashed off the requested article. When I’d done it, it seemed to fit perfectly with the sermon I hadn’t yet written. And this is what I wrote:

One day towards the beginning of September, about 100 people were gathered together in surroundings as far removed from a dingy church hall as it’s possible to imagine. Boys, officers, friends and family, had come from all over the United Kingdom for a very special event. The meeting place was wondrous – nothing less than the State Rooms which form part of the dwelling place of the Speaker of the House of Commons. The River Thames flowed past and we looked down on Westminster Bridge and across the river to the London Eye. In this place, Kings and Queens, Presidents and Prime Ministers, the Great and the Good had walked and talked since time immemorial. It could have been overwhelming. But it wasn’t. Those present commanded the space as if it had been created for them. And the cause we were celebrating deserved no less wonderful a setting.

We were there to honour those receiving MAD (Make a Difference) awards, young people who had shown exceptional sensitivity, grace, and courage in their homes, companies or communities. Jonathan Hatchet of the 1st Bluestone Company in Northern Ireland, for example, had volunteered in charity shops and taught disabled children how to swim and play rugby since the age of 12. Naomi and Mollie Owen of the 1st Hanley Company in Stoke-on-Trent had given unstinting help to their parents in looking after their brother Bradley who suffers from a severe functional disability. By playing games, reading and helping with his homework, they take so much pressure off their mum and dad. And then there was John Blair of the 1st Barrhead Company in Scotland. What a

lad! He has done a huge amount of volunteering and fundraising for a local Hospice Charity Shop and for other charities too, to say nothing of the hours he's given in the service of his own church and BB Company.

The awards were given by one of the Deputy Speakers of the House of Commons, Mr Lindsay Hoyle MP. I shall never forget the picture of this august man, wearing official morning dress and accompanied by one of his officials, kneeling down in greeting and for photographs beside our MAD award winners. There was something fundamentally right about that. In this place where power has been wielded and important decisions taken that have affected the life of the nation, due honour and respect was being afforded to those who work tirelessly and sacrificially to make our communities richer and better. Jesus set a child in the midst of his contemporaries to teach them a few lessons about the meaning of life. That lesson was being re-enacted in the Speaker's apartment that day in early September.

Jesus persists with his message. The child illustrates his point perfectly. Jesus himself would be defenceless and weak as he forged his path forward. That's the message that rings out so clearly through the middle chapters of St Mark's gospel. Just as a drum rolls to accompany the movement of someone about to be executed towards the noose or the blade, so the clear-eyed announcement of impending suffering and death in chapters 8, 9 and 10 would have pounded the message rhythmically into his followers' minds. And yet, for all the impending suffering, nothing, no, nothing was going to get in his way. He is intent on proving that the words he'd spoken about self-sacrifice and service and unconditional love are true. They're not mere words. He sets out to embrace and endure all that life can throw at him. Qualities to which he's calling his followers will be revealed in himself as he plods his determined path forward.

And to prove that NOTHING, nothing in all creation,

neither sticks nor stones
nor broken bones;
the mighty in their seats
nor the cynics with their bleats;
not pain nor tears,
nor the worst of fears;
not the stopping of breath
in the grip of death

shall be able to separate us from the love of God as we see it exemplified in the one who foresaw that:

The Son of man would be betrayed
into to the hands of those who would kill him;
he foresaw that, even when he'd suffered death,
when they'd done their worst,
the story would go on.
through the power of love,
life would go on.

Less can sometimes be more.

We began with Ron Gibbins, let's end with him too. I enjoyed a very close relationship with Ron. And it arose from a friend we had in common. People become Methodists for all kinds of reasons – theological, social, through friends etc. Ron became a Methodist because he was excommunicated by the Church of England. As a boy, and with his pals, he'd let off fireworks during a Sunday School class. This was too much for his teachers – they put him outside the fellowship; so he found an alternative venue in the nearby Methodist church at Dalston. The minister there was a man called Fred Peacock and he is one of my all-time heroes. He was my minister, 40 years later, in South Wales. Fred was simply a probationer minister when Ron met him as a child. In the 1930s in the East End of London, communists and fascists were highly visible and very militant. The story goes that Fred Peacock, young man at the beginning of his ministry, took a stand out into the square where Oswald Mosely's fascists, his infamous and notorious Black Shirts, were to gather. The words "God is love" were painted onto the front of the stand and Fred simply stood above that message. This young man with a clerical collar, never opening his mouth, simply exemplified a supreme message, the antidote to the fanaticism of the fascists, a quality that can change the world.

Less can be more. Love is all. All in all. And we must pray that God's love will pulse through our veins now and forever.

Amen.