

Sunday 28th August 2016

Preacher: Jennifer Potter

HYMNS: 25 "God is here! As we his people"
457 "Author of faith, eternal Word"
322 "how sweet the name of Jesu sounds"
615 "Let love be real, in giving and receiving"

READINGS: Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16
Luke 14: 1, 7-14

"GENEROUS LIVING"

Here at Wesley's Chapel we see in each New Year by holding a Watchnight Service. So, in that last hour before the New Year we remember the year that is passing, including those who have died during the year and we pray for God's presence with us during the year we are about to enter.

As part of the 'looking back' I usually do a review of the year – the politics and the economics, sport and entertainment, films and music. I begin to collect my material for this review around October most years but I've been thinking that this year there has been so much news that I had better start my task earlier.

Lots of news this year and much of it has been pretty bad news. The war in Syria continues unabated, civilians continue to die in air strikes and because of the lack of food and medicines in besieged towns - and more troubling is the fact that we have become used to this situation – it no longer shocks us as it should except when we see the bloodied face of an innocent, bewildered child.

Migrants continue to die as they make the dangerous crossing in their attempt to reach safety in Europe. The Jungle Camp in Calais still houses hundreds of unaccompanied children. Terrorist attacks have become more frequent and have taken on a new form which has made such attacks difficult to detect and prevent. We have seen individuals, like the lorry driver in the Nice attack, with no known history or links to movements seek to kill people indiscriminately. We have only an inkling of how many plots have been foiled in our own country. Just these past few days five people have been arrested in the Midlands.

Then there have been natural disasters claiming lives – most recently the devastating earthquake in Italy.

In terms of politics I think we can all agree that this year has not been great. Most of us cannot understand how a character so abusive, so ignorant and so partisan as Donald Trump can gain such a large following in the USA. He lies; he abuses groups and individuals and takes an accusatory stance against migrants, Muslims and even his Democratic rival, Hilary Clinton.

But are things much better here in the UK? Whatever our stand on Brexit, I think we can agree that neither the 'remains' nor the 'exiters' covered themselves in glory by the way they conducted their campaigns. Idealism seems to have suffered a near

fatal blow and that can be seen also in the unseemly leadership struggles that ensued in both main political parties.

Economically it seems we have learnt little from the crisis of 2008 – bankers still get large bonuses and the Philip Greens of this world still get away with plundering their employees' pension schemes.

What a contrast is offered to us in our readings today. In the passage from Hebrews we heard an idealistic agenda set out for that young Christian community – 'let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. Remember those in prison or being tortured – empathise with them as if it were you who are in prison or being tortured. Keep your lives free from the love of money.'

Then in the passage from the Gospel of Luke we heard Jesus urging his followers to live a life of humility and hospitality. Jesus also urges his listeners to be open-hearted and generous especially in inviting people to eat with them. "When you give a luncheon or dinner," Jesus says, "do not invite only your friends, brothers, sisters or relatives ... rather invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Do not invite only those who can repay your invitation."

Jesus lived a life of compassion and generosity even when it got him into trouble with the religious authorities of his day. He ate with those who were outcasts. He had compassion on the ordinary people who followed him to the extent of feeding 5000 of them on a deserted hillside.

To live as a follower of Jesus is to live generously to those around us.

I began this sermon with a whole list of bad news so I now want to highlight two pieces of good news – one global and one very local.

We all enjoyed the Olympic Games. We are happy that Team GB did so well. We enjoyed celebrating with the medal –winners wherever they came from. There was one story from the Games that has not had such wide circulation. It comes from the women's 5000metres race. Nikki Hamblin from New Zealand and Abbey D'Agostino collided and Abbey fell to the ground heavily. Hamblin gave up the possibility of a medal as she stopped, helped Abbey to her feet and encouraged her to finish the race. A rare example of selflessness!

Both of these women have been awarded the De Coubertin medal for the spirit of true sportsmanship. What a wonderful piece of news, a counter balance to all the negative news about doping in world sports.

The other piece of good news is from much closer to home. This year the Methodist Church at Derby Road in Woodford has been celebrating its 140th anniversary. They have done all the usual Methodist things like having former ministers back to preach. But on the 2nd July they had an event for the whole community which they called Funderland. They got permission from the Police to close off the road in front of the Church and there they had their 'fun day' – music of all sorts, dancing, face-painting for the children and a bouncy castle and food, lots of food for free. The church celebrated by showing that self - same generosity that Jesus had urged on his

followers, inviting people in with no ulterior motive, no expectation of something in return just the joy of being together.

Members of the local community came around in numbers, many surprised that all this was free and for anyone who wanted to come not just for church members.' Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers', our reading stated – well there was no neglect at Derby Road Church. Much to the surprise of the Church members however, the visitors made donations and all the costs were covered!

Now you might say to me – these two examples are small and trivial in contrast to all the examples of hatred and violence, selfishness and greed we can see around us. That is undoubtedly true – but people need encouraging examples and these two stories give us just that. Our calling is to live a Christian life which is generous, open, and non-judgemental – life as a witness to others – that is what Jesus urged on his followers, that is what the Hebrews were urged to do, that is what our faith urges us to do.

This morning we have baptised Ritchie and Bobbi. There is nothing more joyful, nothing more encouraging than a service of baptism. In this service the generosity of God towards us, his people, is encapsulated. We heard again those words and let us listen to them once more.

“Ritchie, Bobbi and all the congregation gathered at Wesley’s Chapel
for you Jesus Christ came into the world;
for you he lived and showed God’s love;
for you he suffered death on the Cross;
for you he triumphed over death,
rising to newness of life;
for you he prays at God’s right hand:
all this for you
before you could know anything of it.

In your Baptism

The word of Scripture is fulfilled:

‘We love because God first loved us.’

This says it all. Anything we manage by way of generosity pales into insignificance in contrast to the generosity of God in Christ towards us.

‘We love because God first loved us. ‘We are enabled and empowered to be generous because of the unmerited generosity of God towards us.

I am saying this to you because I believe, indeed I know, you are a generous congregation – in your love, in giving of your time and in giving of money.

I began by talking about the watchnight Service which begins our new calendar year. Next week we begin our new Church Year. We shall commission our new trustees who give generously of their time and expertise. We shall hear our choir who practise on a Saturday afternoon and before the service on Sunday. We shall hear music by our talented group of musicians. We shall enjoy food provided by the

generosity of all of you. What a wonderful way to welcome the new President and Vice President of the Conference and our District Chair.

May I suggest that, as encouraged by our readings, we practise hospitality and seek to bring someone with us next Sunday – yes, our friends, but also perhaps, people who cannot get about so easily because of poverty or disability. Next Sunday let us not neglect to show hospitality to strangers. May we embrace all into our fellowship – for who knows, as Hebrews says, ‘by doing so we may have entertained angels without knowing it.’ Amen