

12<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Dear Friends,

Have you ever had one of those weeks where time simply gets away from you and you find yourself rushing to catch up with yourself? As I sit here on a Saturday evening writing a Pastoral letter that I would usually have sent on a Thursday evening or Friday morning, I must admit that, that is very much how I feel. In Methodism the usual busyness of the new Connexional Year has kicked in, in full force, and also with a deeper intensity than normal due to the online pressures and deadlines that make things much more intense in many ways even though we have less travelling.

We are of course still living in uncertain days, news of the re-infection rate rising and concerns about potential local restrictions, new guidelines about meeting socially and the continual reviewing of all of that means that we are living with shifting realities and what is true and right today may be neither tomorrow.

So then, how do we act and react with one another, how do we love God and our neighbour, and perhaps most challengingly how do we love ourselves? In challenging times, we need to return to the route call of the Christian life, to live a life rooted and grounded in love, love that hovered over the chaos and spoke creation into being. Love that did not hold back from the wonders of heaven but broke through onto the earth when we most needed it revealing to us the wonder and the vulnerability of the creator who chose to come to us giving all, for all, not despising the manger or the cross, not despising the poor or the weak or the outcast but choosing to include them all and hold them in a restorative, healing way.

In Jesus time so many were excluded by the religious leaders, and even more were outcast by the ruling authorities, crosses were scattered along highways as the criminals, often for minor offences were crucified for challenging might and power, it was to one of these outside Jerusalem that Jesus was nailed, he'd upset both the religious and political elite, but included and loved and affirmed many who felt themselves to be unworthy and outcast. He included people with infirmities, he included people who doubted, he included those with afflictions, the poor, the unwanted and those declared unworthy. As I reflect upon the Gospel accounts and on the letters to the early church, I often question what the church has become in our days. Sometimes I wonder if we are not more like the religious elite of Jesus day demanding that people get themselves put right, that they behave in the right ways, and believe the right stuff! Sometimes it seems to me that our institutions matter more than our people, and that can be at local as well as national and international levels.

I wonder then if that is where we have lost our focus, for local, national and international are human made constructs, while God is a God of a more expansive vision, the one who holds the beginning from the end and the end from the beginning, who imagined us before we were conceived in our mothers wombs, and tells us that we have nowhere that we can go to get away from divine presence.

Meditate on the words of Psalm 139 with me:

*<sup>1-6</sup> God, investigate my life;  
get all the facts firsthand.  
I'm an open book to you;  
even from a distance, you know what I'm  
thinking.  
You know when I leave and when I get back;  
I'm never out of your sight.  
You know everything I'm going to say  
before I start the first sentence.  
I look behind me and you're there,  
then up ahead and you're there, too—  
your reassuring presence, coming and going.*

*This is too much, too wonderful—  
I can't take it all in!  
<sup>7-12</sup> Is there anyplace I can go to avoid your Spirit?  
to be out of your sight?  
If I climb to the sky, you're there!  
If I go underground, you're there!  
If I flew on morning's wings  
to the far western horizon,  
You'd find me in a minute—  
you're already there waiting!  
Then I said to myself, "Oh, he even sees me in the  
dark!"*

*At night I'm immersed in the light!"  
 It's a fact: darkness isn't dark to you;  
 night and day, darkness and light, they're all the  
 same to you.  
 13-16 Oh yes, you shaped me first inside, then out;  
 you formed me in my mother's womb.  
 I thank you, High God—you're breath-taking!  
 Body and soul, I am marvellously made!  
 I worship in adoration—what a creation!  
 You know me inside and out,  
 you know every bone in my body;  
 You know exactly how I was made, bit by bit,  
 how I was sculpted from nothing into something.  
 Like an open book, you watched me grow from  
 conception to birth;  
 all the stages of my life were spread out before  
 you,  
 The days of my life all prepared  
 before I'd even lived one day.  
 17-22 Your thoughts—how rare, how beautiful!  
 God, I'll never comprehend them!*

*I couldn't even begin to count them—  
 any more than I could count the sand of the sea.  
 Oh, let me rise in the morning and live always with  
 you!  
 And please, God, do away with wickedness for  
 good!  
 And you murderers—out of here!—  
 all the men and women who belittle you, God,  
 infatuated with cheap god-imitations.  
 See how I hate those who hate you, GOD,  
 see how I loathe all this godless arrogance;  
 I hate it with pure, unadulterated hatred.  
 Your enemies are my enemies!  
 23-24 Investigate my life, O God,  
 find out everything about me;  
 Cross-examine and test me,  
 get a clear picture of what I'm about;  
 See for yourself whether I've done anything  
 wrong—  
 then guide me on the road to eternal life.*

We are even seen in the dark, we are known through and through, we are held and supported and loved, even when we become angry about our perceived injustices and angry with the wicked as the Psalmist declares, even then in our anger and frustration we are included, as are those whom the Psalmist rages against.

How can that be? Well because we worship the one who spoke ALL of creation into being, light and shadow, the one who knows our shadow sides and selves and the parts of our lives that we would rather not share, parts that in these strange times may have come to the fore in ways we wish they hadn't come to the fore, maybe in our thoughts and dreams, maybe in the things that wake us at night, maybe in things undone and things we wish we had done....

We remembered perhaps that yesterday was the anniversary of the 9/11 or 11<sup>th</sup> September 2001 attack on the Twin Towers, how we watched in disbelief as they fell. At that time, the world was divided, could things get better we asked? I am not sure they did; blame was apportioned, and justice sought, yes love was shown but was it full enough, inclusive enough, brave enough? That is a tough question, and we are still asking those questions, or should be, when we ask do black lives matter, when we join in with the God In Love Unites Us conversation again asking about the worth apportioned to LGBTQI+ people.

If we are all fearfully and wonderfully made dare we ask questions of race, skin colour and sexuality without deep soul searching, in an unjust world what does the history of 9/11 teach us, and how do we live in and love God in the midst a global pandemic?

Surely, we need to find the gentler, kinder way, surely we need to hold one another in love, hold our lives and values before God and seek the Kin(g)dom of Christ among us.

I leave you with a hymn:

1. *And can it be that I should gain  
 An interest in the Saviour's blood?  
 Died He for me, who caused His pain—*

*For me, who Him to death pursued?  
 Amazing love! How can it be,  
 That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*

- *Refrain:*  
*Amazing love! How can it be,  
That Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?*
- 2. *'Tis mystery all: the Immortal dies:  
Who can explore His strange design?  
In vain the firstborn seraph tries  
To sound the depths of love divine.  
'Tis mercy all! Let earth adore,  
Let angel minds inquire no more.*
- 3. *He left His Father's throne above—  
So free, so infinite His grace—  
Emptied Himself of all but love,  
And bled for Adam's helpless race:*

*'Tis mercy all, immense and free,  
For, O my God, it found out me!*

- 4. *Long my imprisoned spirit lay,  
Fast bound in sin and nature's night;  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray—  
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light;  
My chains fell off, my heart was free,  
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee.*
- 5. *No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine;  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness divine,  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own*

As always, please be in touch if you would like to talk, I hold you in prayer at this time.

Peace and blessings

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