

Methodist Churches of the Bath Mission Area
Sunday 24th January – Epiphany 3
Led by Greville Mills

Welcome and Call to Worship

Psalm 62:5-12

Opening Prayers

Loving God, as Father, Son and Spirit you call us from near and far to come together in your name, and so we come from our everyday and our routine to meet with you – the one who made us, and who gives us our daily bread... .

We're getting used to meeting like this; some sitting alone, not allowed out, others meeting on Zoom, seeing familiar faces; getting to know one another; feeling our way in this new community... it's a different way for us to worship you... but you never change; you're the same as ever; always available, faithful, generous, gentle, loving and forgiving.

We are your new church; ready for new things... we come to remember, to learn, to be inspired once more by you as you risked all to come to live amongst us as Jesus, the Son and Messiah... He came to bring good news of the new kingdom; he showed us what you're like; how we could live in community together; loving our neighbour; sharing what we have and being kind and gentle to those who have less; helping those in need.

We thank you that you meet us where we are, in the middle and muddle of our daily lives; troubled and concerned and hoping for better things to come. Help us to hear you; to recognise your voice calling us to discipleship, and faithfully to follow where you lead.

We know we have been chosen by you and you call us to follow... but we are slow, uncertain, fearful... and so we turn to you for assurance...

Take away our fears... fear of being unpopular, inadequate, of having to give up possessions, of losing friendships and people we love, of hard life changes, of becoming different...

When we speak harshly or unthinking, when we fail to reach out to those in need, when we fail to love, forgive others... we dishonour you... so forgive us and change us to be the best we can...

Jesus came proclaiming the good news of God and endured the cross through love for us. Through his sacrifice... we are forgiven. May we share this good news so that others will know your loving freedom in their lives. **Amen.**

Reading

Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Hymn - Be still for the presence of the Lord [https://youtu.be /XOCfPiLOvC4](https://youtu.be/XOCfPiLOvC4)

Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy one is here
Come bow before him now
In reverence and fear
In Him no sin is found
We stand on Holy ground
Be still for the presence of the Lord
The Holy one is here.

Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place
He comes to cleanse and heal
To minister His grace
No work too hard for Him
In faith receive from Him
Be still for the power of the Lord
Is moving in this place.

Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around
He burns with Holy fire
With splendour He is crowned
How awesome is the sight
Our radiant King of light
Be still for the glory of the Lord
Is shining all around.

David J Evans (b.1957)

Readings: 1 Corinthians 7:29-31 and Mark 1:14-20

Sermon

A few weeks ago, we were celebrating the arrival of the wise men, who had travelled many hundreds, if not thousands of miles to greet a 'new king', hailed by a star. I think we tend to forget that it was the wise men who took that first Good News message of the arrival of the Messiah to the Gentile world. A seed was sown...

Now in the third week of Epiphany our lectionary Gospel reading has moved on 30 years, as Jesus begins his ministry...

Unusually, we've had three readings today and although each may have few words, and may have been written many years apart, they share a common theme with a message for those who first read and for us today...

In all of our readings there is a theme of 'immediacy' and 'action'. Time is of the essence.

Mark's Gospel begins and continues in this vein – in v 18 and 20, as Jesus speaks to and calls the two sets of brothers, Simon and Andrew, James and John, they 'immediately' drop what they're doing and follow Jesus.

Jonah was told by God (albeit a second time) to 'go to Nineveh!' and he went (v2-3).

Paul, was writing to the church in Corinth and urging them to be ready, saying '*there is no time to waste*' (Message v29)

Although the responses are similar, the driving forces, (I prefer to call them 'distractions') are quite different.

Jonah had already tried to run away from the task set by God – to go to that mighty city of Ninevah, in the land of their most feared enemy, Assyria. To take a most powerful and demanding message of repentance to its people. So when God gives him a second chance, this 'distraction' remains to test his faith and trust in God.

And at the back of Paul's mind, when he responds to questions asked about marriage, at the beginning of Ch 7, is his concern that there was an expectation of persecution of the church. And coupled with the anticipated imminent return of Jesus, his advice was to not complicate their lives with commitments that would test their loyalties; when they might have to choose between family responsibilities and commitments... or Christ. This was Paul's distraction.

The four brothers, (Simon and Andrew, James and John) may not have considered their distraction of what might happen to their families (of whom we know little) as they decided (apparently) on the spot to 'follow' this man -whom they'd never met before, when Jesus called them to follow him. You could say they were impulsive, inconsiderate to do such a thing.

It's difficult to imagine the effect this must have had on the families, who were never consulted about their decision; how would they manage? The economic effect alone of losing, not just one but two members of this family, must have been catastrophic... but in addition, there were two families affected, which must also have had an effect on the whole of this close-knit community...

But the other distraction was on Jesus himself. In Mark's Gospel, (14-15) we learn that John, the forerunner to Jesus, has been arrested. Someone drawing so many people from Jerusalem, heading out from the city to be baptised by an unknown wild man was bound to attract the attention of the authorities. What they didn't understand they took as a threat. Now it is Jesus who is picking up where John left off, and he is calling to the people to 'repent and believe the good news'. How long would it be before Jesus too would come under their scrutiny?

Mark wastes no time in telling the story of Jesus; there's no birth story, no shepherds or angels or even wise men; we're straight into Jesus' ministry where there is an urgency to share his good news as widely as possible. So straight away we feel what's behind the urgency of his work – the fear that if he too is arrested, his work may be delayed or even stopped, and he announces (v15) *"The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"*

"The time has come." Mark uses the Ancient Greek word 'Kairos' which means 'the right, critical, or opportune moment'. Whatever he said and however he said it to those fishermen on the shores of Galilee... it appears it was the 'right time' for them.

But what is this good news that Jesus was heralding and what was it about it that made such an immediate impact on the four brothers?

God, of course, is involved in all of these distractions... but despite them, the response; the commitment; is immediate! It was the right time for Jonah to go to Ninevah, because when he did, the people repented, and God did not punish them...

It was the right time for the people of Corinth to prepare for the persecution that was coming, even though the perceived arrival of Christ's return did not occur...

It was the right time for the four brothers to follow Jesus because he repurposed their skills as fishermen to enable them, as he termed it, *'to fish for people'* (v17); they became trusted and faithful disciples who spread the good news to those they met; they brought people to faith in Christ.

They each had their 'Kairos' moment when they knew it was the right time; that opportune moment to do something different; to go in a different direction, which is exactly what 'repent' means; to turn around; to change what you're doing.

In essence, isn't that what is also known as an 'epiphany'? Just as a reminder it means...

"that moment when you suddenly feel that you understand, or suddenly become conscious of, something that is very important to you."

Jesus came to the people on the margins; those who had been overlooked, shunned, despised by the authorities; these were the ones who were excluded from the temple, and hence, as they saw it, from God's love.

That's why the 'good news' was so important when it came to them; Jesus affirmed that they were not excluded from God's love; they were just as important, and he came to set things right. This was the right time. This was their 'Kairos' moment. It had been prophesied that the Messiah would come to set the people free. This was it!

From its inception, the Methodist church brought a similar message to people who had been excluded, overlooked and largely discarded by society... especially by the church. With God at the centre, John and Charles Wesley established schools, fellowships with learning and discipline, to reach these people at the margins of society. They listened to them, helping where they could. The church moved outside to where the people were. They introduced lay ministry, including women; preachers who travelled around from place to place. No wonder the movement attracted people and grew and spread around the world. The people spoke up against injustice; for equality; for freedom from slavery; for working conditions for factory

workers and much more... and they backed this up with action and peaceful, passive resistance until rights had been won.

Without the work of the Methodist church, we would certainly be living in a different world right now. But things move on. **That** 'Kairos' moment passed as we approach another.

People living on the margins of society today are more numerous. The gap between rich and poor is ever widening. In our increasingly secular society, there are fewer who care. The rise in populism in politics paint those at the margins as 'undesirable'.

There has never been a better time to do something about this. The pandemic has exposed the vulnerability of so many people across the world, and especially here in what's supposed to be the 5th most wealthy country. What's needed is a radical change, so that all can be reached and helped by looking at such issues as climate change, food poverty, homelessness, disenfranchisement, health and welfare, education – there are so many inequalities... and that doesn't even touch asylum-seekers.

And then there's the church! Although we love our buildings, I think we've come to realise that they may have become a luxury we're paying a huge price for, considering how little we use them.

During this pandemic we've come to discover what's important... it's the people; how we relate to each other; what we can achieve together. We are the body of Christ and we should respond to what's happening around us collectively because that is where we have most power to do God's work; together with prayer and collective responsibility.

This is our 'Kairos' moment; we are being called to action, to work at the margins; where Jesus lived and worked...

The present day call for a response can be seen in the challenge raised in the open letter to the Methodist church (issued June 2020), which if you've not read it I would urge you to do so, (and hopefully sign it).

Amongst other things, it calls us to radical action; to be distinctive – a louder, clearer voice; to revisit our Methodist roots; those actions that set us apart from other Christian denominations; to be a campaigning church; a voice for change, especially with an emphasis on issues of injustice.

It's a wake-up call for us to see where we are putting our energies; not into committees, or fundraising, or keeping unsuitable and inflexible buildings as heritage centres; something for people to look at and admire, but not enter. If we're to do this we need a new culture, a new structure; we need to be lighter on our feet so that we can respond quickly and effectively to challenges or situations as they arise. We need new authority to speak out on issues.

When we have something to say; when we are seen to be doing something to right wrongs; when we are heard speaking out for the voiceless... then people might be more interested in what motivates us; what is our driving force.

With the work that Niall is doing; the Methodist Way of Life we're being encouraged to follow, the Open letter - are all guiding us towards this 'Kairos' moment – which won't last forever.

Will we be like Jonah; have we already run away once? Are we now ready to do what we're called to do? Will we be like Simon, Andrew, James and John? Will we grab this invitation to follow and ignore all the things that hold us back?

This Gospel is still 'good news' and there are many who still need to hear it.

Will you come and follow Jesus? It'll be much better if we go together! **Amen.**

Hymn 674 Would I have answered when you called <https://youtu.be/w9Pn3CwoFRg>

Would I have answered when you called,
'Come, follow, follow me!'
Would I at once have left behind
both work and family?
Or would the old, familiar round
have held me by its claim
and kept the spark within my heart
from bursting into flame?

Would I have matched my step with yours
when crowds cried, 'Crucify!'
when on a rocky hill I saw
a cross against the sky?
Or would I too have slipped away
and left you there alone,
a dying king with crown of thorns
upon a terrible throne?

Would I have followed where you led
through ancient Galilee,
on roads unknown, by ways untried,
beyond security?
Or would I soon have hurried back
where home and comfort drew,
where truth you taught would not disturb
the ordered world I knew?

O Christ, I cannot search my heart
through all its tangled ways,
nor can I with a certain mind
my steadfastness appraise.
I only pray that when you call,
'Come, follow, follow me!'
you'll give me strength beyond
my own to follow faithfully.

Herman G. Stuempfle, Jr (1923-2007)

Prayer for others

These are our prayers to express our concerns... so there will be silences for you to pray into...

Heavenly Father we come to you with our prayers for others. There are so many who seek your assurance of peace and hope that all will be well.

So, we remember before you, those in far off places and those closer to home where there is anxiety, suffering and pain...

We pray for the church, near and far... for its peoples separated... persecuted...

We remember any who are alone, lonely, fearful, sick or grieving at this time... those in care homes or at home... parents and children trapped at home...

We remember all those who are working so hard to make our lives safe once more... those in hospitals and surgeries... supermarkets... shelf-stackers, cleaners and delivery drivers, waste disposal and recycling crews, emergency services crews, those doing unseen but essential work...

We pray for our friends and families, many of whom we may not have seen for a long time now...

Finally, we pray for ourselves... you know us better than we know ourselves... you know our needs...

So, Lord, bring your peace in our hearts, healing in our bodies and minds, and allow us, through our hands, feet and mouths as we seek to share the good news of your love to those we meet, physically or virtually as we ask it in Jesus' name... Amen.

1. Have you heard God's voice;
has your heart been stirred?
Are you still prepared to follow?
Have you made a choice to remain and serve,
though the way be rough and narrow?

*Will you walk the path that will cost you
much and embrace God's love and sorrow?
Will you trust in One who entrusts to you the
disciples of tomorrow?*

2. Will you use your voice; will you not sit down
when the multitudes are silent?
Will you make a choice to stand your ground
when the crowds are turning violent?

3. In your city streets will you be God's heart?
Will you listen to the voiceless?
Will you stop and eat, and when friendships start,
will you share your faith with the faithless?

4. Will you watch the news with the eyes of faith
and believe it could be different?
Will you share your views using words of grace?
Will you leave a thoughtful imprint?

*We will walk the path that will cost us much and
embrace God's love and sorrow.
We will trust in One who entrusts to us the
disciples of tomorrow.*

Jacqueline G. Jones

Blessing

Lord, to the hungry give bread.

And to those who have bread, give hunger for your justice. Amen