



North Kent Methodist Circuit
Worship from home – Sunday 29 May 2022 10.30am
Led by the Revd Naomi Oates

Music before the service begins: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gI9mGy6P05E>

Welcome and call to worship

Hymn: This is the air I breathe

Opening prayers of adoration and confession: Led by Leon Mileham (Pastor of Connect Church Maidstone)

Reading: John 17:20-26: Read by the Revd Dave Baxter (Minister at West Malling Baptist Church and Chair of Churches Together in Malling)

Hymn: From heaven you came, helpless babe

Reflection

When Luke and I moved into the manse, almost three years ago, a local retired Anglican priest spotted us hurling boxes into the garage. Shortly afterwards, the local vicar appeared at the door with champagne to welcome us – not something that often happens to a Methodist minister! He very generously invited me to join his installation at one of the Anglican churches near us on 3 September. I trained at the Queen's Foundation in Birmingham alongside Anglicans, and I quickly sent them a message to ask what I should wear. In the end, I wore my smartest black clerical dress, because I didn't own a cassock at that point. When I arrived, a minute or two before the service was due to begin, the Bishop immediately invited me to take part in the procession. Someone took me through to the vestry, and told me I could change there. I had to admit that the dress I had on was all I had! But they didn't bat an eyelid, and let me take part in the procession anyway, even though I was a little underdressed.

Since being here in North Kent, working with colleagues from other Christian churches has been a real highlight for me. I certainly have no shortage of colleagues – my four churches are in four different Anglican parishes, not to mention the Baptists, the URC, Catholics, a whole host of independent churches – the list goes on. As I mentioned earlier, through the wonders of technology, while this service is being broadcast, I'll be helping to lead a service at St James the Great in East Malling, with Methodists and Anglicans from Larkfield and East Malling worshipping together. Over the coming week, churches from across the Malling area will be working together as part of our mission week, called Known & Loved, through picnics and cream teas and prayer trees and outdoor worship, to bless our communities and to share the good news.

The vision for that mission week came from Luke's Gospel, when Jesus called the first disciples. They'd been out fishing and caught nothing, until Jesus told them to let down their nets on the other side. Then, they caught so many that they couldn't haul them in, and the nets were in

danger of breaking. So they called other boats to come alongside and to work in partnership to bring in this miraculous catch of fish. The Bible tells us that the harvest is plentiful – that God is drawing people to himself through Jesus, that there are plenty of people in this world desperate to hear the good news and for God’s peace and healing and blessing. But we need to work in partnership to be able to bring in this miraculous harvest.

Working together isn’t always easy, I know. Sometimes there are very good reasons for that – deeply-held contradictory convictions that need to be worked through with care and grace. Sometimes, and I know this is true of me, we get caught up in petty issues, or bogged down by jealousy, because another church has more young families than us, or a better PA system. Working together doesn’t mean ignoring our differences – not if we’re going to engage with each other authentically. A couple of years ago, I attended a couple of Scriptural reasoning sessions, where Christians, Jews and Muslims came together to read the same Scripture passage, as it appears in each of their holy texts, and to talk about how their particular faith community interprets it. There was no question of ignoring the differences – instead, everyone there was interested to learn from each other, and to celebrate the things that made each faith unique.

It’s good to be proud of those things that are distinctively Methodist, because they are gifts we can offer to the wider Church. We recently ran a membership course, and talked about how Methodism has a strong tradition of singing our theology through our hymns; we value lay ministry, with 75% of our services taken by Local Preachers; we care deeply about social justice and how the oldest Methodist building in the world was a place you could go for a food parcel of medicine before it was a place of worship; and we have always emphasised that salvation is offered to everyone, not just a select few. But none of that is uniquely Methodist – those are just a few things we value especially highly. It’s important to bear in mind that no church, no Christian, fully understands the mysteries of faith. The Bible tells us that, in our time on earth, we see in part, as if through a glass darkly. The moment we think we have all the answers, is the moment we know nothing at all.

In John’s Gospel, we heard Jesus praying that the disciples would be one. Jesus knew that he would shortly be arrested and killed, but that he would rise again. I imagine he knew that, after the resurrection, he’d only be with his friends again for a short time before he left them to carry on his ministry. On Thursday, we celebrated Ascension Day, when Jesus ascended into heaven, promising the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit to help them in their work. And I suspect he knew that it wouldn’t be long before cracks and divisions would develop – after all, he’d spent three years with these people, and he’d heard James and John arguing about who was the greatest and who’d get to sit on Jesus’ right or left.

Scholars talk about the Johannine community – the community that John’s Gospel emerged from and was written for. Within that community, there seem to have been divisions, not least because some synagogues had started casting out those who professed that Jesus was God. Early Christians who were Jewish had to decide whether to keep their belief in Jesus secret, or risk being thrown out of the synagogue. Arguments sprang up between these ‘secret believers’ and those who thought they were letting the side down. There were also arguments about who exactly Jesus was, with some people arguing that he’d been a spiritual being with no physical form. The author of John’s Gospel saw how important it was for this small, early Christian community to be able to set their differences aside and unite, if they were going to survive. And so Jesus’ prayer is given pride of place – it is Jesus’ wish that his followers should be united, as he and the Father are united.

That resonates, I think, with our situation today. In the 2019 census, 51% of the population of England and Wales reported their religion as Christian. But, as we know, that can mean all sorts of things, and 51% of the population certainly isn’t regularly attending church. It’s no longer

reasonable to assume that most people know the stories of the Christian faith, or have some kind of grounding in the church. Church is now one of many options for people whose lives are filled with work and family commitments and leisure activities. How can we hope to appeal to people, to start a relationship in which we might be able to share the good news, if we can't even manage to have good relationships with other Christians.

It's often said that Methodist churches are supposed to have a copy of John Wesley's 44 sermons, so that if the preacher doesn't turn up, the steward can get up and read one of Wesley's sermons instead. I'm yet to hear of a church doing so, but just occasionally, they contain a gem or two. In his wonderfully-titled sermon 'A caution against bigotry,' Wesley talked about how we need to acknowledge where God is at work in churches that do things differently from us, perhaps even in ways that make us a little uncomfortable, and not just acknowledge it, but actively rejoice in it. And in his sermon 'Catholic Spirit,' Wesley encourages us to focus on the big questions when working alongside other Christians. Do you believe in Jesus? Do you love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength? Do you show your love for your neighbour by good works? If so, he says, give me your hand. "Keep your opinion; I mine, and that as steadily as ever. You need not endeavour to come over to me, or bring me over to me." Wesley says that we must each worship in the way we think best, but "If thine heart is as my heart, if thou lovest God and all mankind, I ask no more, give me thine hand."

Wesley goes on to say what this means in practical terms. It means loving one another with the love that Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13, a love that isn't jealous, that is patient and kind and believes all things. It means choosing to have faith in someone else's faith, in their motivations, in their intentions, and not falling into the trap of doing someone else down to make ourselves feel superior. It means praying for other Christians and commending them to God in prayer. It means prompting each other where there are opportunities to do God's work. And "so far as in conscience thou canst, retaining still thy own opinions, and thy own manner of worshipping God, join with me in the work of God; and let us go on hand in hand."

Jesus prayed that we might be one. John Wesley urged us to offer the hand of fellowship, wherever we can do so with integrity, to our fellow Christians, to hold each other in prayer, and to do the work of God together. May God give us grace, humility and wisdom, as we seek to be his family here on earth. Amen.

Hymn: The Lord's my Shepherd

Prayers of intercession and the Lord's Prayer

Hymn: How deep the Father's love for us

Closing words

Blessing: The UK blessing (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PUtlI3mNj5U>)