

A Pastoral Letter (or Two) by Rev Peter Hills

I'm a treasure-hunter – as are all preachers. And I seek treasure in books, drama and film. While not looking for sermon illustrations, though there is that, I do read other people's sermons: currently I am slowly working my way again through John Wesley's Forty-Four Sermons. (It's forty-three, in fact, since one of them is by Charles Wesley, but John published them.) Reading is something preachers do: indeed, we give our ministers space for reading; and that means not only Theology and Pastoral Theology, but history, biography, newspapers and fiction. (There is so much theology in short stories, novels, opera – a particular love of mine – plays and films, and so much to learn in them about how human beings tick.) But the richest treasure is to be found in the Bible.

That's why my favourite Bible is falling apart through daily use. (In case you're interested, it is the Revised English Bible (REB), though I use the New Revised Standard (NRSV) for sermon preparation, also dipping into the NIV and other versions, and the Greek New Testament when I have time.) I use the daily lectionary (psalm and reading) contained in the Methodist Prayer Handbook; and cherish the three-year Revised Common Lectionary (RCL) which we share with so many other churches across the world. It's lovely to think that the same gospel is being heard on the same Sunday by a Lutheran in Norway, a Roman Catholic in Brazil, a worshipper in the Church of South India and a member of the Uniting Church of Australia. What's more, after three years, if just two of the three readings and a psalm are used in church, a huge portion of the Bible will have been heard.

But there is one peculiarity of the RCL in the middle year (Year B), and it takes place over five Sundays between 24 July and 27 August. John Chapter 6. It's a wonderful chapter: it begins with Jesus and his disciples trying to get away from the crowds, the 'groupies' who are stalking him, some hoping to see more marvels, some in need of healing, and some hungry for the words he is saying. Two miracles take place on that day: Jesus feeds the vast crowd on meagre rations, and all are satisfied, with food to spare; and Jesus comes to his disciples the same evening, walking on the water through a storm. The rest of the chapter, stretched over the next four Sundays, comprises the teaching Jesus gave concerning the feeding miracle. What is peculiar is that the last verse or two each week begins the lesson the following week. In each case it is a 'purple passage':

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not be hungry and whoever believes in me will never die.

I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live for ever, and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.

This is the bread that came down from heaven, not like that which your ancestors ate, and they died. But the one who eats this bread will live for ever.

The risk is that a congregation may have to listen to four sermons in a row on the Bread of Life, as different preachers tackle their particular section; conversely, where the same minister fills the same pulpit week after week, it is a challenge to make each sermon sound fresh – so thank goodness for the Whole Armour of God in the Epistle in week five! Yet it is in week five that the key to the whole chapter is found, that explains everything, as Peter says to Jesus:

Lord, to whom may we go? You have the words of eternal life, We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.

Jesus himself is the key to true life, as he always is.

Peter

The Situation in Afghanistan

I planned the above pastoral letter while lying in bed and walking the dog – as one does – but feel that the situation which has unfolded in Afghanistan needs some comment.

There has never been a time in the history of the world when there were not refugees. The Bible tells of Abram, seeking a better life in another land; Jacob, fleeing for his life; the Israelites, led from slavery to a land flowing with milk and honey; Mary and Joseph taking their infant son to safety in Egypt and later settling in Galilee. In my lifetime, Jews returned to their ancestral lands to create a new state of Israel, following centuries of persecution; since when thousands of Palestinian Arabs have fled Israel for refugee camps in Jordan, hoping to return some day. The Sahara Desert expands and those living around its edges seek a friendlier climate and a new life by crossing the Mediterranean Sea at great risk. Conflicts in the Balkans drove thousands from war-torn lands to new communities in Europe and America. My manse in Tenterden accommodated a Syrian family after I left. And now we open our borders to Afghans, who would rather stay in the land they love, but are driven out through fear of the Taliban.

The Taliban were young men greatly influenced by the teachings of extremists who had a twisted view of Islam. Now they are no longer young, and are battle-hardened, well-armed and supported by other Muslim regimes, whose real desire seems to be the expulsion of foreigners: but they bring in their wake injustice, the death of the innocent, the suppression of women and girls, and the oppression of anyone who thinks differently. How that situation is dealt with is a matter for world leaders, and one would hope that the religious leaders of the world would play a part in bringing about peace with justice. Heaven forbid that western troops will again take arms against these oppressors; and heaven forbid that they will continue the murderous oppression of their own people.

What can we do? First of all, we can trust God, who created the world, who weeps with those who are weeping and comforts those who are grieving, and heals every wound.

*When the righteous cry for help, the Lord hears,
And rescues them from all their troubles.
The Lord is near to the broken-hearted
And saves the crushed in spirit.
Many are the afflictions of the righteous,
But the Lord rescues them from them all.*

(From Psalm 34)

Secondly, we can pray – and I believe in prayer.

Thirdly, we can accept the stranger as a friend.

God bless,

Peter