

Sermon on 2nd Sunday of Creation Time 2018 (9th September)

by The Revd Canon David Hodgson at All Saints Church Wokingham

Gospel: Mark 7:24-37

Creation Time theme: Passing our planet on

Today's Theme: Passing on the gift of hope

This Sunday is the second one in the season of prayer we call Creation Time – the season when we give thanks for God's gift of life and the earth, and pray for help in our care of God's creation. As a theme for the season this year we're looking at God's generosity – what does it really mean to us - this amazing gift of our life, which we share with others and the earth in which we live - this gift coming from God's creative love. How do we generously respond to the generosity of God? Do we in fact – receive God's gift with gratitude and do we respond in like kind with generosity? And in particular this Sunday I want to focus on the gift of hope – and especially God's gift of hope to those people and in those situations where hope seems hardest to have.

Last week I shared on the church's Facebook page an interesting and surprisingly moving short film – some of you may have seen it. It shows what happened when a London church placed a chalkboard on the street and invited passers-by to write on it their ending to the sentence "Before I die I want to..." Answers included "climb Everest", "return to France", (written in French), fall in love, have another child, get the ring to Mordor, be rich and famous, move to Venice Beach, value life more. The film ends with the words "We all want to live" and then on the very last frame: the words of Jesus from John's Gospel: "I have come that you may have life and have it to the full".

What a great way for a church to open conversation about the most important topic of all – life - with its community. It began with a gift - of space- a place to write - for people to open up, to speak, to share their hopes; with no agenda of what you must or should say. But at the same time the question itself – because it's about your life – framed the conversation as a real one, an authentic one – serious but not necessarily sombre as some of the humorous replies show. It even includes the dreaded D word quite normally because we do all know we will die- and so that simple unobtrusive unthreatening line "Before I die I want to..." reminds us that life and this world in which we live it, is a gift -and it has a value – and there is a call on us to decide how we live it.

I was musing recently about that bumper sticker or car window sticker you see around that says: "One life, live it" or words to that effect. I saw it recently on a framed poster in a café somewhere too. And trying to decide whether it's consistent with a Christian vision for life or whether it's subtly atheistic. Not because it could be taken to mean life in this world is all there is and so denies the resurrection. After all it could equally be taken to be about the value of this earthly life as a gift from God to be lived well. One life, live it! But it's a message which feels like it has overtones of pure hedonism; just get on and enjoy your own life and don't bother about anyone else's needs – not helped by the tendency for it to appear on vehicles which look like the owner spends their life surfing or doesn't really care about their carbon emissions!

Behind that car sticker and what prompts musing on it I think is the question which the conversation invited by that London church's chalkboard begins to open up – what does make for an abundant life? The car sticker words "One life, live it" could be entirely consistent with the words of God in the Book of Deuteronomy, by which the people of Israel are enjoined to "Choose life". Yet those biblical words have a context – there is a vision in the Bible of what fullness of life means, - a vision which is framed by the commandments to love God and to love neighbour. So maybe why I feel queasy spiritually about that popular poster "One life live it" is that it offers no context at all – it could equally be an injunction to live a completely selfish and self-indulgent life as to live a generous and productive one. And perhaps most of all it's suspect to me because it gives no hint that there's mystery, struggle, suffering and a giftedness to life. The question on the chalkboard – and the reason this simple film is strangely moving I think – is that it recognises the place of desire and a hint of struggle in life , in fact it invites an expression of hope "I want to.." – the state has not been arrived at – there is a gap between what is now and a future realisation- it

is not simply a matter of an extension of current effort, more of the same. Hope is needed, not knowing for certain that life can be lived to the full but hoping that it will be. There is therefore something superficial in the notion that we can live and fulfil our lives with no recognition of constraints and parameters, with no recognition of the need to hope. U.S. President Barack Obama put it like this: 'Hope in the face of difficulty, hope in the face of uncertainty, the audacity of hope: In the end, that is God's greatest gift to us [...] a belief in things not seen, a belief that there are better days ahead.'

In the section we heard this morning from the Gospel of Saint Mark, two people came or were brought to Jesus to get his help. There was a woman whose daughter was controlled by an evil spirit. She begged Jesus to help her. Here was a family whose life's hopes were at a brick wall which they could not get past without radical intervention. But hope sprang up when Jesus arrived. And there was a man who could not hear and could not speak. Some people brought him to Jesus and they too begged him to help. Here was hope again in what was a hopeless situation. These two healings by Jesus also have another thing in common – in both situations the encounter with Jesus gave them the opportunity to speak out. In the case of the man who could not hear or speak the story culminates with the words; "He makes those who cannot speak able to talk". The second story in a way interprets the first one making sure that we understand that when the power of God breaks into a situation ears and mouths are opened, so those who need words of hope hear them and are set free to express their own hope in their own words.

But there is more to say about that first incident. When the woman approached Jesus begging for help, to begin with she is rebuffed by him; in what could be quite a cruel way. She is an outsider; she is a foreigner as far as the Jews were concerned, a Gentile woman. She is making a claim for help to which she is not entitled. The language used of her is almost as pithy as any British tabloid newspaper editor might be proud of - she is dubbed a scrounger effectively. For Saint Mark's gospel this foreign woman is a symbol of everyone who is excluded and marginalised by established organised communities – regarded as not entitled to be helped – yet still human, still with life in her, still in need of help, still holding within herself the gift of hope given by God.

And here is the power of this story. The woman reverses the rebuttal she's received, turns that exclusion back on itself – "even the dogs under the table eat the children's crumbs" – and so breaks open the barrier to her inclusion in the blessings of God's kingdom which Jesus has come to share. It is the audacity of the hope within her – in the face of difficulty - that generous gift of hope from God – that her life too and her daughter's life have value, which in the end becomes her claim on the blessings and healing Jesus has to offer. And it is in the encounter with the outsider, and only as Jesus hears the words of that excluded woman, that God's blessings are released and God's kingdom is opened in a new way. Her voice, her words, are what do it – so says so the Lord himself. In this gospel we are presented with God breaking in and opening up the world as we know it. God's compassion does not conform to the norms of human institutions, be they religious, social, or political. This is the God who gives us hope, in the words of Mary's song of praise to God which we sing or say at Evening Prayer, that the lowly will be lifted up.

As we consider God's creation during this season of Creation Time we need an honest reckoning of what humanity has done to the earth. For a brutally honest reckoning we might do no better than the words of God in poet Carol Ann Duffy's modern rendering of the medieval morality play "Everyman".

"The Angels weep to see the ruin of the Earth;
the gathered waters which I called the Sea, unclean choking on themselves.
The dry land fractured, fracked
The firmament so full of filth
My two Great Lights to rule the day and night
Have tears in their eyes.

Behold it was all good.
All good. And now? All trashed. For why?
For Everyman liveth only for his pleasure
Therefore, I will have reckoning with Everyman.

In this modern adaptation God's generosity in creation is repaid by Everyman not with generosity in return but instead with selfishness and destruction. In the medieval morality play, Everyman is called to a reckoning by God when Death is sent to claim him. His shortcomings are set to become his destruction and ultimate exclusion from God's blessings. In the end Everyman discovers there is hope but it does not lie in any way of getting him off the hook as it were – there is no way to avoid the reckoning which the end of his life will bring – he has neglected to love God and to love neighbour, in the modern adaptation he has contributed to the trashing of the planet, and there is no getting around it. He is where he is because of the consequences of his deeds and in any standard outworking of things he is due to get what he deserves. But that is where the Christian vision differs from the standard pattern of things. The dues have been paid already by God in Christ on the cross. There is hope for Everyman when he seeks God's forgiveness and repents. And this awareness comes to him through listening and learning, not from his own attempts at self-preservation.

The story of the foreign woman in our gospel today opens up a challenge to us to listen to the voices of those who have been given the gift of hope; especially those on the edges and margins of our society, who may be regarded as having no claim on our attention or even help. What are those voices of hope saying to us? That modern adaptation of the play Everyman is a challenge to our understanding of the crisis of our planet today. Like Everyman we must not be deceived by the idea of placing our hope in denying the past and imagine we can carry on as before whilst trying to find a way to stop the consequences of past mistakes impacting on us. We need to let go of what the philosopher Terry Eagleton describes as "the consoling illusion that fulfilment can be achieved without a fundamental rupture or re-birth". Sometimes there is a break to be made, a letting go in order to receive anew – this is the hidden mystery in that London church's chalkboard question: "Before I die I want to.." hints to us that there's a need for hope and changes in us in order to make life full. For some people on earth now, both within and beyond our shores, business as usual is not working to allow their life's hopes to be fulfilled. God's gift of hope, like the gift of life and the earth, has been given to every person. May we be given the gift of hope enough to respond to God's generosity with our generosity - offering our time and our attention to the voices which God hears, the voices of those for whom hope is hardest; and may we be given the hope to offer from the gifts and resources we've been given and dedicate them to God's work in this world, to see many share the abundance of life Jesus promised to all, and to renew the earth. Amen.