

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 19th July 2015
by Revd John Mills**

We're celebrating the 150 anniversary of this church. I'm an historian by background and training and I've had an association with this church since the 100th anniversary. Perfect you might think for a nostalgic meander through times past here. Well I'm sorry to disappoint you! There may be some remembrance but the lectionary readings today provide challenge as well as comfort and as always they should cause us to assess our discipleship now and in the future.

Let's consider first the Jeremiah passage. As so often with the prophets a specific message for a particular people at a particular time can also speak to us. "Woe to the shepherds who are destroying and scattering the sheep of my pasture" declares the Lord. Jeremiah spoke at a time when bad kings of Judah were leading the nation to destruction and eventual exile in Babylon. We know all too well how in our human weakness we can all too often be drawn into following leaders who bring destruction in their wake. Hindsight is a wonderful thing and we might wonder how the people in Jeremiah's day could follow the kings and ignore the voice of God through Jeremiah. But Jeremiah was a lone voice set against all the trappings of power and wealth, and how difficult is it still to discern the will of God? We wonder how the German people could have been fooled into following Hitler yet forget that before the war he had provided some sense of security and prosperity that had been lacking in the years before. Today, thank God, in Europe at least, we no longer entrust political power to such people. Instead, people seem are all too willing to follow the musings of celebrities about life, love, politics or whatever just because they are celebrities. In a rare moment of insight and wisdom several years ago one famous band sang, "Please don't put your life in the hands, Of a rock 'n' roll band. Who'll throw it all away". When you see crowds at festivals like Glastonbury they still need to take that advice to heart! And yes we're prone to following others in the church as well. I was struck in reading the history of the church by the prominence of the leading families in Victorian times. On the one hand this building is here because of their generosity and commitment to Methodism in Banbury. On the other hand, even in the context of the Victorian age, I'm not sure it was in line with gospel principles that each Sunday the congregation awaited the arrival of the Mewburns' carriage and watched as they took their pew in the centre of the church (whilst their servants took their places in the gallery).

Everyone faces a choice about who to follow or not, who to trust or not. In every age and indeed every day the people of God face the same choices. Are we following Jesus, as we are called to do? The Jeremiah passage contrasts the bad shepherds with the coming good shepherd in a prophecy that Christians have taken to apply to Jesus "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in

the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The LORD is our righteousness.'

And in the Mark reading we see the promised good shepherd. Our reading started with "the apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught". Earlier in the chapter Jesus had sent them out in twos to preach repentance and to heal the sick. A reminder for all of us that Jesus sends us out into a needy world but we constantly need to return to him. It's also a comfort that Jesus in his humanity recognised the need for periods of rest and quiet "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" But as we also know it doesn't always work out like that. In an echo of the Jeremiah passage Mark tells us that the large crowd was to-ing and fro-ing like so many sheep without a shepherd. What can we learn from Jesus's response to these people as we seek to follow him? First and foremost Jesus had compassion on them. This led him to teach them, to provide for physical needs and, as we heard in the last part of the reading, to heal them.

Briefly, what might this example mean for us. Firstly compassion. My tutors at college loved the expressive Greek word used here, **splagchnizomai**: to be moved in the inward parts, your insides to be churned (σπλαγχνίζομαι). Jesus's was churned up inside and the results were that he taught, he provided for physical need and healed the sick. Jesus calls us to follow him and to go and do the same. Some will have been gifted with compassionate hearts to become involved with reaching out to those in need, in Foodbanks, Street Pastors. Others are gifted in teaching about the Christian faith, in youth work, in small groups. Others are drawn to healing professions, healing the body or mind.

The shepherdless sheep are still all around us in society, the lost and lonely, those in need of healing in body, mind and spirit. Unlike Mark's crowd they can't meet Jesus physically, they meet Jesus through us and those encounters may lead to a personal encounter with the living Lord. Again some are gifted in talking through encounter with others. It's well worth reading the Presidential address by Steve Wild the new President of Conference as well as some of the things written about him. Clearly he is a man gifted to sense where the Holy Spirit has already been working in people's lives and to help people make sense of the encounter and bring them to Christ.

In our increasingly secular society how else will people hear of Jesus, his death and resurrection as well as his teaching if we don't tell them? How will those who need the spiritual healing be brought to Jesus whose touch heals if we don't display the difference Jesus makes in our lives?

For the last 150 years people in this church have been doing just that. You'll all have those most cherished by you. In large part I'm standing here today because of the witness of many faithful Christian people, who influenced me much more than I would have given credit for at the time. People with compassion and a heart to teach the

young. People like Ron Messer and Annie Meadows, and later in YPF Dave and Helen Roberts, Alan and Anne Dickens. I deliberately mention those who are no longer with us, moved on or called home but there are many more sitting here today. I pray that now and for the next 150 years there will be many more who will seek to follow the example of our Lord, to follow the Good Shepherd by showing compassion, teaching, offering healing and in doing so bringing others to Christ.

Amen