

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Evening Service on Sunday 7th June 2015
by Rev Michael Langstaff**

Text: Genesis 2: 5-7, Acts 10: 30-35, John 3: 1-15

'I now see how true it is that God has no favourites...' Acts 10:34

I usually hesitate when asked to take anniversary services simply because they can so easily become a feast of nostalgia. How great the temptation to don the rose tinted spectacles when looking back over 150 years! It did occur to me that the programme that has been set in motion is a gift to the plan maker! Ever since receiving the invitation I have been thinking about the services and in particular what message I might usefully bring. Alan Vincent kindly sent me a copy the document produced for this 150th anniversary occasion. I read it with great interest, my memories stirred by names and events from years past. But what really caught my attention was the fact that the booklet begins with Marlborough Road's current mission statement. History is important but we should never lose sight of where we are now and where we hope to be in the future.

We seek to, 'Share in worship', 'Grow in faith' and 'Serve with love'. A mission statement is of course intended to look forward and not backwards. Mission statements need to reflect past and present tradition but promote a forward-looking agenda for the people of God in this place. As I read through the wonderfully researched document prepared by Alan and Trevor, I couldn't help myself when my name cropped up. What did this history say about me, I wondered? What vanity! But I was heartened when I read a sentence that I would happily have engraved on my tombstone. 'He was a reformer by nature.' I was then and I hope still am, a reformer. One of my favourite hymns is 'Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.' The hymn reflects those challenging words that we use in the annual Covenant Service, you know them, 'Put me to what you will, rank me with whom you will, put me to doing; put me to suffering, let me be employed for you or laid aside for you, let me be full, let me be empty, let me have all things, let me have nothing.' I often wonder how we can say these words without trembling at their implication. So with the hymn, which continues, 'Break me, melt me, mould me, fill me. Spirit of the living God, fall afresh on me.'

To be a reformer is to look at what is and to see the possibilities of what could be, reshaping the present into something more, 'God shaped'. A good friend of mine writes a monthly blog in which he often asks awkward questions. His latest blog asks the question, 'The Christian claims that Jesus ushered in a new age (we call it the Kingdom of God). If this is so, 'where is it? Jesus ushered in the Kingdom of God and all we got was the Church!' That final comment was made by a 19th century theologian named von Hammack. So what has and is the Church seeking to do to 'build up Christ's Kingdom?' How often do we hear that phrase at the dedication of the offertory? Jesus called his followers to recognise the sovereignty of God and to stand up for righteousness, justice and truth. His invitation was to discover the power of forgiving love and to live life to the full. I sometimes wonder if we have forgotten this calling and buried it deep in tradition and legislation. My friend continues his blog with, 'today we often seem bewildered at what we must do; so we sink our efforts into preserving a building; it has become a symbol of our commitment. Maintaining the Methodist Church has become our *raison d'être*.' I don't suppose this is what Jesus had in mind'.

So very briefly let's look at our readings. Of course I have done what no self-respecting preacher should do, that is lift things out of context, but I hope you will forgive me for that; but our readings do provide a peg upon which to hang some ideas.

First of all to our reading from Genesis. This is of course the second creation narrative. It graphically makes the point that God's first act of creation was to make humanity, followed later by all the rest. Man

is formed from the dust of the earth but he is nothing until he reformed by the breath of God, the ruach, the Spirit which gives him life. It is according to the scriptures the Spirit of God that moves throughout creation bringing life and enabling humanity to become the image of the creator.

John's gospel gives us another important perspective. Jesus speaks to Nicodemus about rebirth, being reformed (that word again) by the power of the Spirit into new life. But here is the part I want you to remember. The Spirit of God is not controlled by anyone, the Spirit: the wind of God blows where it wills; it is never contained in any building, administration or construction. We have just passed Pentecost, again we hear the gospel writer speaking of the Spirit being like wind and fire, bringing new life, reforming those first disciples.

Then in the book of Acts we have the lengthy story of Peter and Cornelius. The infant Church based in Jerusalem was engaged in a struggle, what to do about people who were not Jews, not like them. Should Christian converts become Jews first? Following his experience with Cornelius, Peter is required to reform his views. 'I now see how true it is that God has no favourites, but that in every nation the person who is God fearing and does what is right is acceptable to Him.' The point that each of our readings makes is that the Spirit of God is not controlled by anyone, can never be contained in dogma, tradition, rules or liturgy, the Spirit blows where it wills and has no favourites. Sometimes we forget this, our systems seem so important, our rules become paramount, we want people to be like us and so often we fail to see the Spirit of the living God in others.

Your mission statement is bold and challenging. 'Share in worship'. But share with whom? Share our worship or share with another's vision or tradition of worship? 'Grow in faith.' How do you grow, and is faith inherited or discovered, can another's faith influence your faith? 'Serve with love.' Remember always that Jesus told his friends that the core of his message was to 'Love God with all that you are, and to love your neighbour as yourself'. Who was the neighbour? It was the Samaritan, a person of different tradition and faith.

Someone once asked me if I had any regrets. Of course I do and some of my regrets are reflected in Alan and Trevor's history of Marlborough Road. I regret that we just couldn't bridge the gap between the various denominations here in Banbury, tradition and practice just kept getting in the way; that real opportunities were missed. But perhaps my greatest regret you will not have heard about and it may surprise you. In the late 1980's a small but significant Muslim group was forming in Banbury in the Neithrop area. They met together in a house but soon outgrew it. The Imam came to see me with a question. 'We want to find a place where we can gather together our children after school to teach them the Koran; could we use a room in one of your chapels?' The answer of course was, 'No'. It would actually take an act of Parliament to enable that to happen. What might have happened if we had been able to say, 'Yes?' We live today in difficult times with many challenges. How easy it is to become entrenched in our tradition, to pull up the drawbridge and continue with the familiar. How hard it is to take risks, to allow ourselves to feel the movement of the Spirit which challenges us, easier by far to shut the doors and windows and let the wind of the Spirit blow around us.

I am a reformer by nature, I tend to dislike the status quo, I seek new ways of expressing faith and service, and I hope that some of you do as well.

'Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us. Break us, melt us, mould us, fill us. Spirit of the living God fall afresh on us.' Are you ready for that to happen? May God in the power of his Spirit richly bless you all as you move forward into the next phase of your life together in this community.

Amen