

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church  
at the Evening Service on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2015  
by Rev Trevor Thomas**

**Text:** Matthew 9, verses 11-13

HP 500 – ‘Lord God, your love has called us here’

*Introduction to our theme.* This evening we explore, through a series of meditations and prayers, the nature of the Christian gospel, with a special focus on the Gospel of Luke. For whom is the gospel intended? Is anyone excluded? And how does the Christian gospel continue to inspire Methodism?

*Prayer*

We remember with gladness the nature of the gospel.

The joy and simplicity of the Gospel is the love of God: persistent, searching like the shepherd in the parable – the God who mysteriously, and unlike us, never runs out of options.

Could I ever ‘lose my way’ so many times that God would give up on me? **No**. Listen to his words, heard by the 8<sup>th</sup> century prophet Hosea: ‘How can I give you up, Ephraim? I am God, not man – the Holy One among you’ (Hosea 11: 8, 9).

God gives no one up. Praise God.

Luke 15, verses 1-7

HP 215 – ‘Amazing Grace’

**First Meditation: For whom is the gospel intended?**

Luke brings us many characters who have lost their way: the tax collectors, the prodigal son and his elder brother, for example. But Luke also presents us with a society in which many voices have been lost, a society whose ‘narrative’ is controlled by certain political and religious groups. Into this society comes a young woman who finds her voice after receiving a visionary announcement. We call Mary’s song the Magnificat: it speaks of the scattering of the proud and the lifting up of the humble.

So the gospel is intended for society as well as the individual. It meets us in the personal experience of ‘lostness’. It calls upon the powerful to change their whole ‘mindset’ so that the suppressed and lost voices may become audible.

This chimes in with the ways of God today. One of the collection of books we have recently acquired about Israel/Palestine is called ‘Bethlehem Speaks’. These are Palestinian Christian voices whose message is easily drowned out, but, unless those voices are heard, there will be no lasting future for Israel/Palestine either in one state or two.

Ralph Waller in his personal portrait of John Wesley reminded us that the founder of Methodism was made angry by the institution of slavery. In a letter, written towards the

end of his long life to William Wilberforce, he wrote this: "... a man who has a black skin, being wronged or outraged by a white man, can have no redress; it being a law, in all our colonies, that the oath of a black against a white goes for nothing. What villainy is this?" When the voiceless find a voice society itself changes. Through tireless work the legal institution of slavery was eventually brought to an end, though the wicked practice continues into our own time. So Mary's Song cannot and will not be silenced.

Prayer

Luke chapter 7, verse 36 to chapter 8, verse 3

HP 428 – 'There is no moment of my life'

### **Second Meditation: Is anyone excluded?**

According to Luke the Pharisees exclude themselves. Resisting the call to repentance, they put a safe distance between themselves, the 'separated ones', and those defined as 'sinners'. Their search is for public recognition. Yet they are play-actors, indifferent to human distress. They sneered at Jesus, because they loved money (Luke 16: 14).

So the Pharisees excluded themselves from God's tireless search? Or is that Luke and his community speaking?

The 'mindset' Luke portrays is not confined to a particular religion, certainly not to a Judaism that looks to works for salvation, rather than faith.

What Luke's story highlights is the pitfall into which religious people in general are prone: the temptation to control the distance I allow between myself and the 'sinful' world. One of the outrageous things about the woman's behaviour in Simon's house is the way she invades the 'personal space' of the host and his guests.

The other outrageous thing about the story is the acceptance she was offered by the principal guest. Like Chris Packham and Andrew Marr (at least in this respect) he was evidently not a 'religious' person. He took no care to separate himself from ritual and moral defilement. Is that a clue to why Jesus aroused such fierce opposition?

The Christian religion has proved no more immune to the temptation to separate itself from the 'sinful world' than Judaism. So, when we sing Luther's hymn, can we remember that it starts with the opening of Psalm 130: part of Jewish worship, and a confession of faith in the God of unfailing love who will himself redeem Israel from all their sins (vv 7 and 8).

Prayer

HP 429 – 'Out of the depths I cry to thee'

### **Third Meditation: The Gospel and Methodism**

So, how can Christ's cause go on? How can Methodism keep going?

The original cause depended for its resourcing on a group of women, of very diverse backgrounds, some privileged, others very marginal. What they all had in common was two things: a deep sense of their need of God (in Mary's case a desperate need), and personal experience of the healing touch of Jesus.

Wesleyan Methodists, unlike the Calvinistic minority from which the maternal branch of my London Welsh family came, believe that *all* can be saved. Salvation is not just for the elect. This was the issue that divided Calvin and Arminius, and came to divide Whitefield and Wesley. The Countess of Huntingdon and the Welsh Calvinists are part of that story.

At Northampton Road in our Market Harborough Circuit one of our church banners proclaims 'All *can* be saved'. But, as we know, the *need* is universal too.

Now, go back, if you will, to Luke's group of women: the financial backers of Christ's mission. And relate their story to ours. Where do we look to for resources? Churches with large premises keep returning to that question.

The Gospel offers us an answer. Unless we are resourced by people who know their need of God from personal experience, and have felt God's healing touch, the cause will run into the sand. But, where there are people who rejoice in the wonderful reality of the gospel, by God's grace the cause will go on – filled with a generous spirit and a large ambition. God bless you in your continuing search for the way ahead.

Intercessions – Lord in your mercy: **hear our prayer.**

### **The Lord's Prayer**

The Offertory

HP 62 – 'Captain of Israel's host, and Guide of all who seek the land above.'

Benediction