

The Best of All is God is With Us



<Isaiah 43:18-19>

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, **do you not perceive it?**
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

<John 5:2-9a>

² Now in Jerusalem by the Sheep Gate there is a pool, called in Hebrew Beth-zatha, which has five porticoes. ³ In these lay many invalids—blind, lame, and paralyzed. ⁵ One man was there who had been ill for thirty-eight years. ⁶ When Jesus saw him lying there and knew that he had been there a long time, he said to him, **“Do you want to be made well?”** ⁷ The sick man answered him, “Sir, I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up; and while I am making my way, someone else steps down ahead of me.” ⁸ Jesus said to him, “Stand up, take your mat and walk.” ⁹ At once the man was made well, and he took up his mat and began to walk.



Last Sunday, in the middle of conference, our new President, Rev. Richard Teal delivered the sermon for the Westminster Central Hall service. He spoke about three characteristics of a disciple of Jesus that are (or should be) true of all disciples but are specifically the places that we as Methodists place our emphasis. First. A warmed heart. Second. Personal holiness.

Third. Social holiness. Holiness is about a changed inner life and personal spirituality and prayer but is also expressed in community through a commitment to life together and social justice. It was that thread about social justice that I heard weaved throughout the conference and that I want to reflect on today.



In his presidential address the previous day, Saturday, the Rev. Richard Teal had reflected on this time of COVID-19 and how in amongst our lamenting and longing for this time to pass that it has been a time of great change. That in our disorientation, there has become an awareness that all is not as it should be with the world. We have seen the effects of poverty on who catches the corona virus. We have seen pollution lift from our cities and the air become breathable. We have seen an awakening of those concerned for black, Asian and ethnic minority lives. God is using this time to change us and to bring forth a changed reality. In our Isaiah reading, God says: *I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth.* We are coming out of this time as transformed people. As Isaiah continues: **do you not perceive it?**



At the conference, the president, VP, conference secretary and VS, were all sitting at Cliff College at desks that were socially distanced. Rev. Richard Teal put a wooden giraffe on his desk. He explained that: the giraffe was given to him during a visit in early 2020 to Kenya. He left it there for the duration of the conference for symbolic reasons. The giraffe is



the only animal that does not hide fearfully in the savanna grass. It stands tall and proud looking upwards and outwards. It is seen as an animal of vision. As Revd. Teal said, **may we Methodists take a lesson from the giraffe to be a people of vision looking not just at ourselves but outwards and upwards.** And some of the other speakers had fun in their homes placing giraffes in the vision of their cameras! Unfortunately, my giraffe from Uganda is in my storage unit in the US, or I would have put it behind me this morning! But that is why there is a silhouette of a giraffe in our picture for today.



Each day for the business sessions there was both early morning devotions and a Bible Study. Tuesday's scripture was the gospel reading from John that we have just heard about the blind lame man by the pool being healed. Both the morning devotions and the Bible Study reflected on that scripture. The morning devotions were more focused on personal holiness as the Rev. Carrie Seaton pondered about the blind lame man and the isolation he must have felt and the loss of confidence in even trying to get into the pool after 38 years and how Jesus offers unprovoked grace healing the broken and forsaken. If that is you, there is the good news.



Deacon Karen McBride, warden of the diaconal order, led the Bible Study reflecting more on social holiness and pondered Jesus' question to the blind, lame man. ***Do you want to be made well?*** She asked us to consider this question not as individuals, but instead as a question about the health of the body of Christ. I am going to try and summarize what Karen said:¹

For 38 years the man's only focus had been the pool and his only aim was to get in it first before anyone else. Have we lost sight of our real purpose for being here, about our wellbeing and living differently? COVID-19 has unveiled truths of inequality and injustice around the world. The brutal death of George Floyd and the BLM movement have again revealed the costly nature of injustice. In the Methodist Church, the decision that will be made about *God in Love Unites Us* report, the discussion of which has been delayed a year, has the possibility of increased harm and hurt rather than wellbeing.

There is more than one pandemic raging, keeping God's people and children from being one and those pandemics are raging in the body of Christ. *Why does the man not grasp the opportunity for healing and cry out Yes? Why do we not respond to calls for social justice?* Was it scary for him to imagine living in a different way? It is risky sometimes to respond to Jesus' call! We must pay attention to what Jesus is asking us to do: Stand up, take ours beds and walk and live differently. We will not be able to go back to business and usual and be well. Jesus will not collude with some getting in the water first and others left on the side. Jesus is always about God's costly life-giving work. We have a Godly invitation to stand up and engage differently.

My thanks to Deacon Karen McBride for her thoughts.



It was that invitation to stand up and engage differently that I heard come through the business sections. I was touched by the Methodist Conference lively discussions on **Climate Change and Fossil Fuels and caring for the earth** AND by the extensive **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion** discussions. Earlier in our service Chris talked about The Revd Dr Inderjit Bhogal who gave the Beckly Lecture this year. He was the first Methodist president of colour and

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yo4hRw69Sqs&feature=youtu.be> beginning at 2 hours 21 minutes.



that was 20 years ago. There has not been another president of colour since then. So, I rejoice in the choice of Revd Sonia Hicks as president elect, but it is disappointing that it took so long.

There were many speakers who talked about racism in the church and the need to ensure that our connexional leadership reflects the diversity that we have in the connexion. And that the same need is there at District, Circuit and Local Church level. The discussion also included talking about the systemic changes needed to bring about a wider cultural change in society, and that as Christians, and in particular Methodists with a call for social holiness, that we have an obligation to participate in the cry for justice from our black and Asian and ethnic minority neighbours. There is much more we can do. And our voices matter. But as one of the delegates pointed out, **we cannot advocate without understanding or even believing that there is a problem.**

I was very encouraged by what I heard, but it has to go further than just the six East Anglia District delegates and those who watched the livestream. We all have a responsibility to learn about racism, to accept our complicity, and to work for change.



As I watched the BLM protests unfolding in June, I wondered what part I could play. I set up a ZOOM meeting about 10 days ago and invited folk from the 3 churches to participate in a faith discussion on racism and white privilege. There were only 5 of us, plus a few apologies. We decided that the best place for us to start was with our own education. So, we will be

having a ZOOM book study that I will be leading. Everyone in the district is invited to participate. We will be reading a book by a black author called, *Why I'm No Longer Talking to White People About Race*. The author's name is Reni Eddo-Lodge. And the book is on the Sunday Time's Best Seller list.

We chose the book because racism is a white person's problem. This allows us to be in dialogue with a black person while learning to listen to their perspective without anyone of colour needing to be in the room. Our churches here are full of white people with a small minority of other races and ethnicities. We welcome the participation of all in this discussion, but do not want our siblings of colour to be put on the spot or having to speak on behalf of their whole race. This is just our first step, and it will probably be uncomfortable.

If you support BLM, then come and find out how to be a better ally. If you think we should be saying ALM, then come and find why that is problematic. If you are colour blind, then come and find why that is problematic. If you think racism discussions have no place in the church, then come and find why that is problematic. If you have heard the term white privilege and do not know what it means, then come and find out more.

These are important and difficult discussions. But the first step towards advocacy and justice is through learning. Let's do that together. Come and join me! The first session will be on **Thursday morning at 10.30 a.m. 9th July** and we will decide on a schedule after that. No need for the book for this first meeting. And contact me for the Zoom info.



Let us grow together in discipleship and social holiness. May we perceive the new things that God is doing. May we as the body of Christ reply **Yes** to the question *Do you want to be made well?* I pray that Ipswich Methodist Church will be full of giraffes looking not just at ourselves but outwards and upwards. May we truly with warmed hearts be able to proclaim with John

Wesley the wonderful news **that the best of all is God is with us**. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Notes

It was explained earlier in the service that Our new Methodist President and Vice-President for this year have chosen the theme *The Best of All is God is With Us*. This is a very Wesleyan theme as these are the last words that John Wesley is said to have spoken before he died, as he raised his arms into the air and, with all his remaining strength, cried out twice, *The best of all is God is with us*.

Resources

Methodist Conference 2020 resources are linked from our Circuit Website at <https://methodistic.org.uk/methodist-conference/>. Note the videos will only be available until 1st August, 2020.