

THE BROKEN-OPEN CHURCH

Wesley Memorial Methodist Church, Oxford

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Preacher: Peter Storey

Isaiah 58: 1-14, 2 Cor. 5: 14-20, Mark 2:1-10

This past week I have been very privileged: I've been exposed to the finest minds in world Methodism; listened to erudite and outstanding papers about everything Wesleyan. John and Charles have been pulled apart and put together again, and the awesome story of the Evangelical revival has been microscoped and analysed yet again. We return to it repeatedly, in case we might have overlooked one of its secrets. As we do so, I wonder if I sense a little desperation ... as ... "why can't we do today what they did then?" and ... "what was the secret?" And I can hear Mr Wesley, in his dry humorous manner, saying: 'You haven't written a paper on my horse yet. Surely you know there could have been no revival without my horse? He took me out of the bubble of the Church and into the real world.'

A wonderful week, but, let's admit it: spent a bit of a bubble. There's a real world out there that wouldn't make head or tail of most of what we've been talking about. And the challenge as you go home now is once more how to help aspiring pastors discover what it means to minister in that world.

Which is WHY our Gospel today.

Here are five friends – one is paraplegic. The others feel deeply for him. You could say they are intercessors. They may not know what that word means but long before they carry him with their hands they have carried him in their hearts – in my book that's the beginning of intercession. But it's not the end: intercession must become solidarity and action, so our four faithful friends lift up their heart burden – their paralyzed mate – and bring him to Jesus.

Well, they try! The trouble is, the church gets in the way.

The crowd filling every nook and cranny of that house are there to hear Jesus 'speaking the word to them.' You could say that *they are doing church*. There's nothing wrong with that, except that when our four friends get there, everybody has their backs turned and nobody lets them in.

In fact, *having our backs turned to the world may be the church's most practiced posture.*

That's why, on that day long ago in Capernaum, however important it was to do church with Jesus, and listen to his teaching, to do all the stuff churches do, *it was time for more important things to intrude.* Our four heroic saints determine that if a preoccupied church has its back to the world, the pain of the world will have to hack its way in.

You all look politely pre-occupied doing church with me right now. Imagine if we began to hear the clomp of heavy boots on this roof, followed by the sound of pickaxes and other heavy cutting tools right above us, and bits and pieces of wood and plaster begin to drop down on our heads. Some of us would begin to shift out the way, and in spite of the congestion of a moment ago, miraculously, there's suddenly lots of space! We look up, and there, peering down on us, are four grimy faces, covered in dust and sweat, each bearing a triumphant grin. One of them shouts down, "So you thought you could keep us out?" and then, "Watch out Jesus! Here comes some work for you!"

We shouldn't be surprised that real intercession is much more than knowing about the world's pain: it is about feeling it so deeply that we have to act. Mother Theresa used to pray: 'O Lord I pray that you will break my heart so wide open that the whole world falls in.' And if compassion for the marginalized, excluded, wounded and hurting persons should result in some damage to church property ... well ... so what?

Let me tell you about a church I know, the Central Methodist Mission in Johannesburg (SA Methodism's 'cathedral') where I once served. In my days our incense was the scent of tear gas, our frequent visitors police with their batons, because it sheltered people hurting under apartheid. But in the years after I left it offered a different kind of sanctuary: more than two thousand refugees from Robert Mugabe's terror in Zimbabwe fled and lived there. They were in every space, each night they stretched out on the pews and floors to sleep, they cooked there, ate there, some gave birth there, others died. It was not a 'nice' place anymore. It stank. Doing church was difficult, perhaps because it was *being* church? When I visited it angered and hurt me to see the almost irreversible damage to this gracious building. I could almost feel its agony as it absorbed into its walls the travail of its new, frightened, lost inhabitants.

But Jesus wasn't hurt or surprised when it happened to *his* church. The people saw a disruption: Jesus applauded great faith ... faith that freed him to act.

John Wesley would not have been unduly disturbed either at what happened in Capernaum or Johanneburg. Once he left the confines of the church and engaged the world in the wide open air – ‘disruptions’ like this were common. We’ve been reminded often this week of his instruction that works of mercy should take precedence even over works of piety. If we’re doing church - even if we are holding our hands out for the Sacrament - and a deep human need intrudes, we must leave the bread and wine and attend to our neighbour’s pain.

So, however I felt about the damage those poor people were doing to CMC, I had to reckon with Mark, Chapter 2 and Wesley’s injunction, because here’s the thing:

When the church gets broken, that’s when the world gets mended.

Let me go further:

Only when the church gets broken-open can the world be mended.

Maybe we church people need to get real about what is more important to God, the church or the world? I think God votes for the world – and there’s some good Scripture to back that up: It was into the *world* that the Word came to be flesh and live. (John 1.14) It is the *world* that “God so loved, that God gave...” (John 3: 16) It is the *world* that God in Christ is busy reconciling to God... (2 Cor. 5: 19). It is to the *uttermost parts of the world* that Jesus orders his disciples... (Acts 2:8). On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit pushes the disciples out of their sanctuary *to face the world* and the church is born as much on the streets of Jerusalem as in the Upper Room... (Acts 2). It is the “*whole created universe* that waits with eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed” (Romans 8: 19), and it is the *Kingdoms of this world* that must become “the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ.”

So ... if our God is a world-engaging, world-affirming God. If Scripture is about God’s love affair with this messy, hostile fallen and broken world then the call to engage with it is a non-negotiable. Maybe its the only time we *are* the church. The rest is at best a dress rehearsal and at worst, a form of playing with ourselves. That’s what Isaiah the prophet: is saying in our Old Testament reading: God says, ‘This religious stuff you’re doing just doesn’t move me – not until you get broken open and start doing something about my world.’

And Wesley and his Methodists got close to seeing this ... In a world where so many religious people think it more important to be right than good, Methodists in the end put perfect *loving* ahead of perfect living.

Two other factors made the Wesleyan revival not just a soul-saving exercise, but a nation-transforming movement. They were, first: *location*, and second, the *three-letter word 'ALL'*.

First location, location, location: When this starchy high churchman located with the poor I believe he got broken open. In the process of regularly sharing their humble homes, their meagre crust, their heavy burdens and terrible degradations – and marvelling at their new found trust in God – he found he had arrived at Jesus' home address. *When that happens you cannot remain unmoved and unchanged.*

When I was sent to make my ministry among the thousands of people of a place called District 6 - a Cape Town ghetto of people of colour where the government was determined to forcibly remove every one of them because of the colour of their skin As I moved amongst them seeking to encourage them, I was changed by their pain and changed by their faith. I felt a holy indignation at this trampling on God's little people, the poor, but I was also baptised into a community of courage and grace. I became different because I found Jesus living there.

So with Mr Wesley: on the one hand, blazing indignation at the way the comfortable looked upon the poor: "So wickedly false, so devilishly false, is the common objection: 'they are poor only because they are idle.'" And on the other, awe at the discovery that being with the poor was as much a channel of God's grace as receiving the Bread and Wine at the Eucharist.

And then that three-letter word: We've used a lot of long words this week. But the word that brought tears of joy to the poor of England – the word that disrupted the serenity of all the '*rich, clever and famous*' in St Mary's church down the road from here was a much simpler and far more dangerous one: it was the word '*ALL*.' The word '*all*' started a quiet revolution because it had implications beyond those even understood by Wesley. My dad used to say that everything begins in theology and ends in politics. The continental political writer Ostrogorski spoke of the humanising influence of the leaders of England's Evangelical Revival: "They appeal always and everywhere from the miserable reality to the human conscience. They make one see the man in the criminal, the brother in the negro." He said they "introduced a new personage into the social and

political world of aristocratic England – *the fellow man (sic).*” That fellow man, Ostrogorski predicted, “never more will leave the stage.” Indeed, this new honouring of all men and women, valuing human dignity above position and property, ultimately flowered in both the trades union movement and the British Labour Party, and 200 years later Wesleyan convictions about an *all-*including God would have similar implications in an apartheid society shaped by Calvinist exclusionism at the Southern tip of Africa.

Remember those days? When the whole world looked on my country with disbelief and disgust because of what we were doing to people? I have two abiding memories:

The first was that we had to choose what really mattered:

During Apartheid we could live through it all with our backs to it – just doing church (and many Christians did just that) – or we could recognize that this was more than just a sickness (just as Jesus did in Capernaum) more than just a political issue – it was a theological sin and therefore if we were silent our very identity as church was at stake. Apartheid denied the very core of God’s reconciling intention for all humanity (2 Corinthians, 5). MY father was leader of MCSA in 1957 and I remember him saying: “This government believes that while one black person and one white person remain friends in SA, the government will have failed. We believe that while one black person and one white person remain enemies in SA, the church will have failed. We are diametrically opposed and will not place the church at the disposal of the state.” Those convictions broke us open. We had to decide: That led us into nearly 40 years of struggle and disruption.

The second memory is about you and your solidarity. You never left us. You recognized that our sickness might be yours too. Christians in this country, in the USA and Europe and all over the world stood with us. When we were weak you challenged us, when we faltered you were there carrying us back into the struggle. We will not forget when the South African Council of Churches was put on trial in 1981: *it’s a lonely business being interrogated as Desmond Tutu and I were, each for more than 21 hours before* the tribunal set up to discredit the SACC. But neither can we forget when we heard a scraping of chairs and into the public gallery came representatives of the World council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, the National Council of Churches in New York, the World Methodist Council, the World Lutheran Federation, the EKD in Germany and others. They had left their work all over the world and flown to South Africa, demanding to make witness – to

say to that tribunal, 'when you attack the church here, you attack the church everywhere.' So many churches around the world allowed themselves to be broken open for sick, sinning South Africa – and in the end we found the beginnings of healing and forgiveness.

But the disease was not blotted out ... Dion was right: we shouldn't talk about a post-apartheid SA ... nor should we speak of a post-apartheid world. We were not the last outpost of racism, discrimination and the oppression of the poor ... we were the forerunners of a world-wide epidemic which has now crashed upon us - there is a global form of apartheid abroad today, and we dare not ignore it as if life goes on as usual.

What might this story be saying in the world of Trump and Brexit? We've tiptoed round those words this week but in many conversations at this conference people have metaphorically wrung their hands in despair. But most of all I sense a problem - that Trump and Brexit are seen as political issues, to be solved by a next election or some miracle negotiations in Brussels.

They won't!

Because they are not primarily political issues. They are signs of - a divided world turning in on itself, a great backward slide into the worship of the old idols of nationalism and race – of hubris and pride – of walls and draw-bridges - of fear of difference – of secret arrogance in the whiteness of my skin. We South Africans know these signs, we've been there ! We've done that! We're witnessing a 're-fracturing' of humanity. In direct and deliberate contradiction to the words of Paul when he says that *because Christ's love compels us....*

'from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. ¹⁷ Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: ^a The old has gone, the new is here! ¹⁸ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.'

There is no greater priority that I can see in the New Testament than that we should be in the forefront of the struggle to bring divided humanity together if we cannot do that we have no word to say to the world. We can talk about conversion till the cows come home. We can talk about holiness and piety until the cows come home, but if we cannot show how divided humans can be brought together to find one another *we have nothing to show*. It follows that if we don't see the

deliberate divisiveness of Trump and Brexit as essentially theological problems, we are as blind and oblivious as that church in Capernaum long ago. Some of us who come from the countries that Donald Trump dismissed with an expletive find it hard to believe that while all this is happening the church in America seems largely silent, more preoccupied with issues of sexuality than with the real immorality in their midst. We have waited to hear God's church on this side of the Atlantic say unequivocally, loudly and together: 'In the name of Christ you cannot with a Christian conscience continue along a road that will unravel one of the greatest experiments in reconciliation that the world has ever seen, that has turned the enemies of centuries into friends and neighbours and saved Europe from war. It's a miracle of the Spirit that the people of Europe found one another, so, *how dare we* silently collaborate in the dissolution of that imperfect, messy yet amazing achievement in reconciliation called the European Union? Messy, cumbersome, annoying and bureaucratic it may be, but it is a work of God, taking this part of the world closer to the bonds of unity and peace.

So, the question is, whether we will continue to think our job is to keep doing church in the old safe way while the world that God loves more than us goes deeper into sickness and death,

or ...

whether we might find the courage of those four faithful friends who refused to let the church remain undisturbed, or the breadth of a Wesley who said 'its the *world* that's my parish,' (not the church) or maybe we might come to live out a paraphrase of the words of that wizened little Albanian nun and pray: 'O Lord, open up my *church* so wide that the whole fall can fall in.'