

Sermon: 'After Pentecost – Dreams and Visions'

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Methodist Central Hall, Westminster

Sunday 13th June 2010 6.30 pm

LESSON: Acts 2:14-21 & Matthew 9:14-17

Sometime ago my wife and I had gone to a restaurant for a meal. We were welcomed and shown to our table by one person, asked what we wanted to drink by the drinks waiter, and had our orders for food taken by a third member of staff. A little while later we were tucking into our food and the food waiter came to our table and asked: "are you satisfied with everything?" A minute or so later the drinks waiter walked past the table and enquired: "are you satisfied with everything?" A couple of minutes later the young lady, whom we had met at the reception desk, came along and asked: "are you satisfied with everything?" Having put my knife and fork down for the third time I felt tempted to say: "well, I might be enjoying this meal if I didn't keep getting interrupted to ask if I was satisfied!" I resisted the temptation and simply responded: "yes, thank you, very nice!"

I want to pose the question this evening: "are you satisfied?" And if you are thoroughly enjoying life, then I apologise for the interruption!

Much of the Bible addresses situations where all is not well and where people learn to be dissatisfied with things as they are – a godly dissatisfaction!

The phrase "dreams and visions" is found in the story of Pentecost, but it is actually a quotation from the Old Testament prophet, Joel.

We don't know much about Joel, except that he probably lived about 400 years before the time of Jesus, and that he was exercising his ministry as a prophet at a time when there was a severe plague of locusts. This meant disaster for the farmers and famine in the land. Joel was calling his fellow Jews to penitence and indicating that their penitence could lead to recovery from the plague of locusts and help prepare them for the day of the Lord. God's spirit would be poured out on the people and "sons and daughters would prophesy, old men dream dreams and young men see visions". (Joel 2:28). There was no need to live with their fields blighted and their national economy blighted. God's Spirit, poured out on penitent men and women, gave dreams and visions of redeemed lives, redeemed land, and a redeemed nation.

As Christians we see that prophecy being fulfilled in a more complete way on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came on the followers of Jesus and filled them with power.

An explosion took place. Certain individuals were blown apart by what happened on the Day of Pentecost and became new men and women, full of God's power.

Eventually the religious structures of the day couldn't contain what was happening and

the young Christian Church broke out of the strait jacket of the Jewish religion because the new wine could not be contained by the old wine skins, to use the imagery that Jesus used. The real tension between the old and the new came about because there were those – on the one hand - who believed they were alright as they were (the temple worship and ritual) and – on the other hand – there were those who believed things could be different, because they were so full of the power and grace of God. The difference was between the spiritually satisfied and the spiritually dissatisfied. Only the spiritually dissatisfied dreamed dreams and saw visions.

And so I want to ask this question “are you satisfied?” on three levels and to invite you to get caught up in the dreams and visions that follow from Pentecost.

The first question is: Are we satisfied with ourselves as we are?”

Some of the psalms express a longing for God that makes it very obvious that the psalmist is not happy with life as it is at the present. Psalm 63 opens with the thought that his soul thirsts for God and his body longs for God “in a dry and weary land where there is no water”.

There are moments when we know that so much of our life is like a wilderness, barren and dry, and that we long for something meaningful and fulfilling. Longing for God, and longing for more of God, is a life-long search.

When Jesus began His public ministry He gathered around Him a group of young men. The sort of men who became His disciples are the sort we might expect to find on the football terraces on a Saturday afternoon, in the pubs straight afterwards, and going to nightclubs to look for girl friends later on in the evening. There was something about what Jesus was offering that became the most exciting and fulfilling thing that could be experienced – and it was worth giving up other things in life to follow Him. Jesus met the inner dissatisfactions of their hearts.

Do you have a sense of longing for something that you have not found? A sense of being unfulfilled? The best paid job and the most wonderful marriage partner and the most beautiful children and the most luxurious house are not the things that will satisfy forever. If we feel some inner sense of dissatisfaction, then it is likely that it is because we need more of God.

And when we have allowed God to get hold of us there are many things He can do with us to change us and refine us. It’s easy to feel that we have to struggle on with certain imperfections in our life. Occasionally I’ve heard people say: “Well, this is how I am – I’ve got a bad temper and I work on a short fuse, and if people don’t like it ...too bad, they’ll have to put up with it!” Well, there’s no need for us to put up with ourselves *as we are* – never mind expecting other people to put up with us as we are. A sense of dissatisfaction with ourselves can be very healthy - because it’s at that moment we can ask the Holy Spirit to come and do something with us.

One of the great emphases of Methodism has always been the doctrine of sanctification. To be sanctified is to be made holy, and to be like Christ. And it’s like

a journey in which there is still more to explore – and most of us would not dare to claim that we had arrived at our destination. There is always plenty of room for godly dissatisfaction with ourselves and plenty of room for a large vision of what God can do with us.

One of the most amazing Japanese Christians was a man called Toyohiko Kagawa. He exercised a tremendous Christian witness in one of the worst slums of Kobe city. His work brought transformation to many lives and to the whole community, and later his work touched the rural areas of Japan. His work was so well respected that the Emperor of Japan asked to meet him at the end of the 2nd world war because he wanted to learn something about the Christian way. The key moment in Kagawa's life had come when he was a young man, about a century ago, when he made a commitment to follow Christ and prayed a simple prayer "O God, make me like Christ". At that time, nobody could possibly have dreamt the difference that prayer might make.

The second question I want to ask is: "Are we satisfied with the Church as it is? I don't necessarily mean "this" church – but the whole Church of Jesus Christ.

In our debates and discussions about the Church, we sometimes give the impression that what matters is whether our numbers have gone up or down, whether we can survive as we are. Whereas what really matters is whether we – as a Church – are the best model for conveying the good news of Jesus Christ to our contemporaries in a largely secular society.

One of the great hymn writers of the Church was Isaac Watts, who was a young man by the time John and Charles Wesley were born. When he was young, Isaac Watts became very dissatisfied with the worship of the church he belonged to – the only hymns that were sung were metrical psalms that tended to be very dull. It was out of a sense of dissatisfaction that He discovered that God had given him a gift of poetry – and he went on to write hymns that helped to transform the worship of his day, many of which we still sing today. Open to the Holy Spirit he was able to dream dreams and see visions of something different.

Within the British Methodist Church we have been invited to mark this Sunday as Methodist Homes for the Aged Sunday and, as Jane has interviewed Sylvia this morning and Judith tonight, we have learned a little more about the splendid work MHA does as a leading provider of care for the elderly. But this began with one man's awareness that everything was not as it should be. In the days before the Welfare State, Revd. Walter Hall was conscious of elderly people becoming poor and vulnerable and facing the prospect of spending the rest of their days in the workhouse. And he persuaded the Methodist Church that something should be done, in the name of Christ, to make things different.

He had a vision. And the Methodist Church caught that vision – in 1943 – the dark days of the 2nd World War when people might have been forgiven for being more concerned with survival and self-preservation rather than dreams and visions.

In a hymn about the church, Richard Jones – former President of the Methodist Conference – says:

“Explore your visions, pray for more,
For God delights to meet fresh needs” (H&P 765)

If we are open to the Holy Spirit, God can use those feelings of dissatisfaction we have about the Church to dream dreams and see visions.

The final question is: “Are we satisfied with our world as it is?”

The answer to *that* question is a very obvious “No”.

We cannot be satisfied with a world where there is so much hunger, poverty and homelessness.

We cannot be satisfied with a world where there is so much injustice, oppression and exploitation.

We cannot be satisfied with a world where there is so much violence and war.

And *most people are* dissatisfied with the state of the world as it is.
But not everyone believes that anything can be done to change it!

One of the distinguishing marks of Christian men and women is that they are people who believe things *can* be different, people *can* be different, communities *can* be different and that the world *can* be different. That’s a “godly discontent!” People who have opened themselves to the Holy Spirit *know* that God can change things and change people – starting with ourselves.

This is why the contribution of Martin Luther King, Baptist Pastor, made such a huge difference to the Civil Rights Movement in the USA in the 1960’s. The deep dissatisfaction he felt at racial disharmony, and the belief He had that God could bring about a change in this situation were epitomised, of course, in his famous speech with the theme: “I have a dream.” That dream was a God-given dream.

Some of us were inspired by the musical written for the Millennium, inspired by the late Rob Frost and his team. The musical was entitled “Hopes and Dreams,” and one of the songs Paul Field wrote captured the theme:

“Yours is the kingdom of hopes and dreams,
Yours is the power of love;
Yours is the glory of heaven on earth,
For ever and ever.”

When I asked that question at the outset this evening: "Are you satisfied?" I wasn't wanting to spoil your enjoyment of all the things that are good about life, about our life, or the life of the Church or the life of the world.

Nor was I wanting to persuade you to become one of the malcontents of the world – always going around moaning about the state of everything.

Rather, I was wanting to persuade you that if we have received what God wanted to give us at Pentecost, the gift of the Holy Spirit, we should be in the process of becoming men and women who see what needs to be changed but who are inspired to dream dreams and to see visions of what *could be* if we let God do with us what He wants to do.

We are going to sing a song written by Gerald Coates and Noel Richards that is a prayer:

"Come, Lord Jesus, come Lord Jesus,
Pour out your Spirit we pray"

And the song reminds us that we are a people of dreams and visions extending to the final time when "darkness will vanish, sorrow will end, and rulers will bow at your throne."

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