

I must admit I was very uncertain about the idea of preaching at this Circuit farewell service, but Nel & Martin in the end persuaded me that it was a good idea. So you know who to blame!

In doing so I have tried to sum up what I feel God has called me to in these past 32 years of ministry and the last 7 amongst you. I well remember John Eagles, the senior Circuit at the time of my invitation here to focus on HL and help them on the journey they had started, as a distinctive expression of Methodism in the circuit. A lot has changed since then and not just in HL too! 2 very simple things I want to share with you.

The first passage is all about seeing and believing and so my first point is - Believe in God! It might seem so obvious, especially to a group of believers, but JB Philips words of 1952 still ring true today! Your God is too small! So I ask you what kind of God do you believe in!

I guess we are all children of our time and my formative years were the seventies, when long hair and spiritual experience was all the rage. Introduced to faith in Jesus by BB officers, I strayed far wide in my university years, practised Buddhist meditation, became an initiate in a Raja Hindu sect in Kilburn and studied the teachings of Gurdjieff. Meanwhile my Christian friends prayed for me and in time I returned to the claims of Jesus on my life. In a very unemotional and logically way I realised Christianity could only ever work if you believed wholesale, so I decided to believe these words of scripture and the rest as they say is history.

John uses different words in the Greek for both seeing and believing in this passage and I too found that that moment of seeing, later became a moment of knowing - when God became Father in spiritual rebirth, born from above. It was the moment that God became real to me, A God who loved, and forgave, despite the hurts I had caused Him. That was a realisation in itself that I by my actions could hurt my Father in heaven. My early days were an eclectic mix of Methodist services MHB style; charismatic worship alongside Catholics and pentecostals; the orthodox - Jesus prayer; Luis Palau & Rob Frost Missions; Mennonite courses and social justice marches on Parliament. And of course helping to run our London District' holiday for underprivileged children in summer holidays over 3 years. It was there that I met a certain young lady on the team; the following year we were engaged and the 3rd married, before heading off to theological college.

The difference I saw in the church and what I read in scripture and the accounts of early Methodism really frustrated me, especially I was beginning to understand and experience a God who did speak and lead his children, who healed the sick and transformed people lives! There are people listening to this whose lives have been totally changed by meeting God for themselves, healed too! God is awesome and I have had the privilege of witnessing His hand at work, so many times; a 10 year old pray for her father to be healed of liver cancer and the whole family come to faith; of being beside a IC bed when God turned up in power. The nursing

sister who was there was nearly knocked off her feet - "what on earth was that!" she said and how Val recovered to speak of meeting Jesus and being sent back. The power of God has blown me away many times, but I always remember a time when a Chilean Methodist minister spoke about the revival there to a group of Methodist ministers in the Midlands. He just said "Come Holy Spirit" and blew on us and literally all of us fell to the floor. Do you believe in a God of power, a God who changes people's lives. Thomas doubted the accounts of his friends and demanded to see the evidence himself. It was a humbling experience for him when Jesus turned up. If you're God is still too small pursue Him with all your worth and be prepared to be amazed!

Now I have seen God heal many people over the years, but there is a point when every believer needs to decide on the goodness of God. Circumstances do not go our way or prayers seem to go unanswered or some family tragedy hits us. I have argued with God many times and I have learnt so much from those encounters, but it is all too easy to slip into blaming God for our ills. That is a sin, a sin against God's nature. There is not a shred of evil in our God and it is offensive to suggest otherwise. I may not always understand it, but God defines goodness and love and much else beside and I have learnt to set my compass point by His definition and not mine!

I could go on speaking about the nature and character of God all night, a bit like the Wesley hymn we sang beforehand, verse after verse speaking of our amazing God. Did you know in the original it has 22 verses! but I need to go onto my second point, which is simply the other side of the same coin. From believe in God to

"God believes in YOU"

Throughout scripture we see this God of almighty power choosing to work in and through human agents. From God's help mates in the Garden of Eden, through all the heroes of Old & New Testament. None more so, than when Jesus modelled kingdom living and then sent out his disciples with authority to heal and share the good news, ahead of him. They returned amazed at God's power, but even more that God had used them! And God wants to use you too to bring the wonder of His kingdom crashing into other peoples lives. I have witnessed so many eyes opened to this wonder over the years. Over 50 adult baptisms in 17 years! Sometimes it seems to me that those outside the church can be more open to God's kingdom than those within!! Have we become so used to the 'good news' that we no longer recognise it? Have we really domesticated Almighty God like a much loved pet by the fireside, a comfort in our old age!!

Of course, many of you are the real McCoy, living saints, still learning, still walking with God. exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit for others to see and to learn from. Bless you for your faithfulness and love and keeping me on my toes!

In the passage from 1 Peter, the apostle reminds the church what he had learnt from following Jesus and how he had come to see himself but also the identity of all the church. First as living stones built together by God, but he goes on to speak of us as being chosen by Him, of being priests in His kingdom, a holy nation and the people of God!

Our hymn 'Moses I know' speaks of what it means to be 'a people of God' - because God is love and he loves His people profoundly there is security and safety in Him. He is our strong tower! And yet paradoxically God's people are always found to be on the move, often literally as in our case, or at least spiritually - from that strong tower of love He is always calling us on an adventure of faith. The people of God, dearly loved as we are, are nonetheless always a vagabond race!

And we a vagabond race - God chooses the most unlikely people - just take a look at Jesus' disciples - and He mixes us all up together to become his people, the people of God. It is why I just love church - different ages, and classes and races and opinions and ideas and gifts - and God says now get on!! Church becomes the place where we learn how to love and sometimes that is not easy! How I pity those who hop from one church to the next, still looking for that perfect place, rather than that transforming place!! Jesus said others would know His disciples by our love for one another - not because it would be easy, but because it was a sign that God's power was transforming us!

Finally, a royal priesthood, I cherish the Methodist Church understanding that though I am set aside for ministry, that ministry is no different in kind than any of yours! We are all priests in God's kingdom, more than that, royal priests of the King. Priests who have authority to pronounce God's blessing over our land and other people. What an honour! The number of people who have cried as I have blessed them is more than can be counted. Believers, atheists, Muslims, the sick mind or body. Some of you are stepping out into that ministry yourselves, but everyone of you has been called! Some of you have been in services where I have invite the ladies to do a twirl while the guys applaud the princesses among them - heirs and co-heirs with Christ - the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords.

Many of us have a poor view of ourselves, some of that is due to our past or present hurts, some because we live in a culture that will often belittle our faith in God. But God has a high view of you, He believes in You and when you decided to follow Jesus, he made you to be His own, forever cherished and loved. But His hand of invitation to us is not back into His strong tower, but out from it !

"But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy." 1 Peter 2:9,10

You are a blessed people, now go and be a blessing to others in Jesus name!