

Woodstock, 2.2.20

Psalm 15; Micah 6.1–8; 1 Corinthians 1.18–31

Which camp are you in? Was 11 o'clock on Friday night a moment of freedom or a moment of disaster? The start of an adventure or the end of one?

So Brexit has finally been got done. Or at least the end of the beginning of Brexit. And we've all got to rally round and move forward together. Apparently. But rallying round will be an awful lot easier said than done. If we thought getting Brexit done was complex, then getting the aftermath of Brexit done might surprise us.

This has been a divisive period in our nation's history. Some people are fed up but some people are really very angry. It has brought out markedly strong emotions in quite a lot of people. And I wonder why. Why has this issue above so many others touched a nerve for so many people?

Being part of the EU used to be a normal thing. Very few people were bothered by the issues at all before 2016. But some things which we might all think of as just the way things are can, in fact, shift over time. Since 2016, quite a lot of people have become very bothered indeed by the question of being part of the EU. And I wonder why.

After all, there are things which we generally just seem to accept as part of reality which in fact don't have to be reality at all. They're just the way we've chosen over the years to organise our society. The whole capitalist system, for example. "That's just the way things are." But, in fact, that's just the way we've fallen into things being over the years. Some of it by deliberate policy decision, some of it by accident. And if we really didn't want it to be that way, it wouldn't have to be. Or take nuclear weapons as another example. Most people probably hardly ever think about nuclear weapons these days. But our country took the decision to have them, and insists on keeping on having them at the same time as insisting other people shouldn't have that right. *If it's a right.* Nobody seemed to bat an eyelid when our previous prime minister was asked in parliament if she would be willing to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people by firing a nuclear weapon at them — and she replied that yes, yes she would be prepared to do that. And the reason our prime minister was able to stand up in parliament and say she would be willing to kill hundreds of thousands of innocent people was that we generally just accept that nuclear weapons are the way of the world and that's just how things are.

And people who say "hang on, surely it doesn't have to be this way" are nutters. Those who dissent are weird. If you agree with the mainstream then no one ever asks you to justify your views; if you disagree with the mainstream you're constantly having to say why you think the way you do.

But notice what is happening with climate change. I wonder if we might be in the middle of a shift from a particular dissenting view being for weirdos and nutters to becoming more mainstream. Not too long ago, green issues seemed very much for the hippies on the margins. It was a strange idea for strange people. But now...

There's the political story of how the shift in views on the EU happened, of how the person who was our local MP here at the time (and just happened to also be prime minister) wanted to head off those who had more extreme views, both within and beyond his party. And how that seemed to backfire spectacularly. And there was political campaigning and articles in newspapers and protest voting and all the rest. But I rather suspect that it is also because Brexit became an issue of *identity*. We all have some idea of *who we are*. And if that sense of who we are is challenged or threatened then understandably it seems to affect us emotionally quite deeply.

In a few weeks' time we'll be having a circuit discussion about the Marriage & Relationships report. This is a report which last year's Conference (the national decision-making body of the Methodist Church) provisionally accepted and which is out for consultation this year with a view to a final decision being taken at this year's Conference. There are copies of the report available at the back of church for you to borrow and read; it is also available online from the Methodist Church website. I would encourage you to engage with the circuit event if you can, but if you would like we can also arrange things here at church — and I am always open for conversations with anyone about it myself. I am willing to listen to whatever you have to say and to respond to whatever questions you may have.

I don't want to talk in particular about the details of the report now, except to say two things. Firstly, that it deals with some things which are deeply entwined with people's identity. With how our faith impacts on our lives and how we regard sexuality, for example. It's no wonder that over the years these kinds of discussion have proved divisive and very emotional. We in the church have tried hard to improve the quality of our conversations — but it's not easy, because such strong feelings are involved.

And the second thing I'd like to say is that for many people, the big question is *is the shift in our policies as a church which the report proposes an acceptable shift?* We have seen how shifts in how society views what is normal can happen. And within the church we can shift too. In Psalm 15 we read that those who walk blamelessly are partly defined as those who do not charge interest on loans. Now, charging interest on loans is a pretty fundamental part of our capitalist system. But in the book of Ezekiel, for example, you can read that charging interest on loans is an abomination worthy of the death penalty. We've shifted a long way from there.

Trying to work out what is the right thing to do is often not as easy as we'd like. We will disagree. Micah asks what the Lord requires. Which means it probably wasn't obvious. The people came with their burnt-offerings, the worship which was normal and indeed what they thought God wanted them to do. And Micah, perhaps sarcastically, asks if he should come even with his child to sacrifice. Sacrifice was what the people thought God had told them to do, and here is Micah saying the opposite. It's not about following the letters of laws so much as, in that rightly famous phrase, *doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with your God*. The prophet gives a fundamental principle to work with rather than all the little details.

I bet they had a bit of an argument at Conference that year.

I started by asking “which camp are you in?” But the psalmist’s question is “who may abide in your tent?” If you have to be so blameless and you have to extract yourself from the ways of the world, who on earth can get in?

Corinth may have been quite a divided city. There were certainly several different groups of people living there. And I wonder, what were the symbols of their identity? What was it that made Corinth Corinth? Paul draws out two groups of people, which he calls the Jews and the Greeks. These would indeed have been different social groups in the city, but perhaps it’s worth considering the idea that some Jews were from the old homeland in Judaea and others had spread themselves (or been spread) around the Mediterranean over the preceding centuries of invasion and exile. Over time they’d have grown to do things differently and have a different conception of what were the fundamental things which made them Jewish. So it could be Judean Jews versus Greek-influenced ones. Add to that the fact that the church was beginning to grow beyond its Jewish roots and a hugely important question (and one which Paul cared deeply about) was the question of whether followers of Christ who were not Jews first had to become Jewish, because Christianity was a Jewish renewal movement.

Incidentally, much the same happened in the early years of the Methodist movement. Did new Methodists have to be Anglican first? And what was it that showed we were Methodists? Hiding in all of our histories, whether you have grown up in the Methodist tradition or not, whether you have grown up in the church or not, hiding in all our histories are these little symbols of our identity. Those things which we may not normally notice but which push our buttons when someone questions or threatens them. I know where some of mine are — and I wonder if you know where yours are.

What is it that really matters to you in our relationship with our neighbours? And what is it in the Marriage & Relationships report which really matters, I wonder? Is it really marriage? Or sexuality? Or sex? Or relationships? Or friendship? Or how what we might have been taught when we were little suddenly doesn’t seem so secure? Or how we might be moving away from old truths? Or frustration at how other people seem to get away with things we couldn’t? Or is it how we read the Bible? Or how we think about our faith? Or how we consider what is the right thing to do? I wonder.

And how much of all that is actually about symbols of our identity? We might discover that we feel that you can’t be properly Christian unless you think such-and-such a thing, or behave in such-and-such a way. Whatever those symbols are for us, they are no doubt important parts of walking on the Christian way, but are they really as essential as we feel they are? Maybe they are — but maybe they aren’t.

The Greeks wanted wisdom and the Jews wanted signs. But Paul proclaimed Christ crucified. It’s a unity in the crucified Christ. Foolishness! Also: what on earth does that even mean?! (We’ll come back to that).

When something big like Brexit happens, it’s very tempting to blame other people. It’s all the Brexiteers’ fault we’re in this mess. Or: it would all be going much more smoothly and be done by now if only the Remainers had shut up and accepted they lost.

I'm not saying we should blame ourselves instead, but I am wondering whether blame is the way to go. It's so tempting, though! But I wonder whether, if more and more we walk humbly with our God, then it becomes harder to lob blame around willy-nilly.

Perhaps better than throwing blame around in a conflict is to consider what those important symbols of identity might be that we feel are important. Both Brexiteers and Remainers talk about wanting to be free, for example, but their *symbols* of freedom might be different ones. Perhaps, then, there is something deeper that we share. Or perhaps we might find ourselves able to grant someone else's symbols because it turns out our own symbols lie elsewhere. I think that's how so much progress was made in Northern Ireland with the Good Friday agreement. It turned out things like flags and marches and language mattered because they were *symbols* of identity; and working on the symbols meant other discussions could go more smoothly because the symbols were what people felt really deeply about.

But Paul is not trying to engage in conflict resolution here. He's saying there's something even deeper going on, at a level which seems ridiculous but which actually unifies us, brings us together. We exist in the crucified Christ. And the crucified Christ is about the whole of humanity. All those other symbols and those other identities do matter. They are part of who we are. But they are not the thing which in the end matters.

Micah mocks the idea that God might require the sacrifice of the firstborn child. Yet here we have Jesus, who we identify as Son of God, put to death. Whatever happened on the cross, it's not just a simple sacrifice to appease God. It's deeper than that. It's about God identifying with humanity even in our death — something which is so foreign to God's nature that it is almost unimaginable. And the result is to lift humanity up to God. Also, perhaps, unimaginable. But the effect is to ground our identity deeper in Christ than in anything else. Christ is about the whole of humanity being linked to God. Of course we're not blameless, but we can get into God's tent.

Paul said: think about where you came from. Not many of you were wise or powerful or of noble birth. Not many of you had lots of money and privilege. Not many of you were famous or looked up to. But *some* of you were. Paul didn't say *none of you*; he said *not many of you*. And a key feature of early Christianity is how people of all kinds of different social backgrounds mixed together in a way which was pretty much unimaginable before.

Friends, we have a challenging time in our country in plotting where we go from here. We have a challenging time in our church, considering what *doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God* might mean for us in the future. But in all of our difficult conversations, wherever they lead us, let us hold on to the fact that our deeper unity is in Christ. We are listening to people whose experiences will be different from ours, whose sense of identity may be different from ours, whose deeply-felt symbols may be different from ours. But we will be dealing with people we belong with, because in the end it is in the supposed foolishness of Christ where we hold our true identity.