

## Woodstock, 9.9.18 – Rev'd Paul Carter's first sermon:

### Readings for the week:

**Psalm 146**

**Mark, Chapter 7, vs 24 – 30 – Jesus meeting the Syrophenician woman**

Well, hello!

So, am I what you were expecting? I wonder what you *were* expecting. I wonder whether you had any particular expectations at all.

Some of you have met me when I've visited previously or in the last few weeks since we moved in; some of you may have seen me at the circuit welcome service just over a week ago; for many of you this will be the first time you've seen me. But even those of you who have met me don't really know me yet. And, of course, I don't really know you yet either. So we're setting out on what might be a time of surprises for us all.

And, in terms of churchy stuff (that's a technical theological term) you don't know what my ministry here will be like. Well, *I* don't know what my ministry here will be like either. That's not just because I don't know yet what the life of Woodstock Methodist Church is like and I don't know much about living in the area yet. It's also because, as a probationer, I'm new to all this. I'm only at the beginning of the journey of knowing what it's like to be a minister and, in particular, what it's like for *me* to be a minister. So I fully expect there to be a few surprises on the way.

The Bible is full of surprises. There aren't many ancient texts which keep telling you how the heroes got things wrong. God keeps choosing all the wrong people, or so it seems. If you wanted to choose a leader for the people you might not have chosen a murderer who was no good at public speaking, like Moses. David wasn't the obvious choice and had to be hunted out. Even Jesus was a bit surprising.

Faith is not always what we expect. Perhaps Jesus thought he was escaping for a while. The crowd and the disciples are gone, and Jesus heads off into Gentile territory presumably for a break of some kind. These people didn't do faith right. Maybe they didn't stand to sing, or they came up for communion at the wrong time. But Jesus finds a persistence and a faith he didn't seem to expect. But, after all, how can anything good come from Nazareth? Jesus was himself not really what they expected.

Faith involves surprises. That's because faith is about trust; it's not about certainty. Yes, we know God is love and God loves us but that means we have trust for what is to come rather than certainty. We look to the future with hope and trust even though we don't know what it will hold and we can't control it. But faith is trust. Faith is trust.

So faith goes beyond those rules about who was in and who was out. The Bible and our Christian traditions do not contain enough to tell us exactly what to do in every situation. We get a general idea rather than specific rules.

Some of us quite like rules; and, of course, rules have their place. Maybe some of you enjoy board games. There's one we play sometimes at home called *Ticket to Ride*, in which you have to build railway links between cities. Some of the versions of the game can get quite complex so we used to play simpler versions before we slowly added the extra rules. That was fine, as long as we all agreed on the same set of rules.

Sports work in a similar way. Cricket is a good example: there are the basic rules of the game but also different forms of the game which have their own variations on the rules. For those of you who know, T20 is quite a different animal from test cricket, but they are both identifiably cricket.

Rules are not always written down, as they might be for a game or a sport. The rules many people drive by, for example, are not quite the same as the ones in the Highway Code. So rules don't have to be laws as such, they can just be those unspoken social agreements, like how we queue. Queue-jumping is quite a serious offence even if you won't find a law against it.

And the rules can be bent or interpreted. Cricket umpires and football referees have a bit of leeway in their decision making. When a situation arises, we can all interpret the rules in a different way, or bend them a bit. I might not normally drive through a red traffic light, but if it enables the ambulance behind me to get through I would happily do so. I might get annoyed at a queue-jumper but then let someone in in front of me if it might be helpful.

When an unusual situation arises, the rules don't always fit well. Life's surprises don't always fit the rules.

If you want to succeed at games or sport or driving, or even queueing I suppose, you need an element of technique and practice. There are the rules and the ways of doing things we learn; but, in fact, practice enables us to stop thinking about the rules and just get on with the task at hand. When you learn a new game you have to keep thinking hard about the rules and working out a strategy. When you learn to drive you have to think about when to change gear or what to do with your feet. But with practice these things become natural and you don't have to think about them any more, or at least not in the same kind of way. They become a kind of second nature. When you start learning a musical instrument you have to work out every move of the fingers; with enough practice you can just think about the music and your body seems to do what's needed automatically.

When you've learned a skill so you don't really have to think about it any more it's possible to improvise. One of the most obvious examples is with musicians, and especially with jazz, which sets great store by improvisation. The musicians know the general structure but what comes out flows from something deeper, built on their experience of technique and practice and they use much less in the way of conscious thought. It seems to just happen; sometimes it seems to come from somewhere else.

Perhaps the way we live as a community of followers of Jesus is like that too. We know the basic ideas but in our learning of the techniques of how to love each other, safe in the

knowledge that God loves us, and in our practising of the skills of living in our community, we can live in that flow. We can get to a stage where it seems to come from somewhere else. We have a game plan but the game itself unfolds as we play it, and we never quite know what's coming next. More than one jazz musician has said things to the effect of there being no wrong notes: what matters is the note you play next. The next note Jesus played after meeting the Syrophoenician woman was pretty impressive. In our life together we will play wrong notes. Stuff happens. We muck up. But then forgiveness means we can turn around and say 'OK, where do we go from here?'. What is the next note to play which moves us on from where we find ourselves, however we got here?

So, who am I and what will my ministry here be like? What will my improvisation be like? I don't know the answer to those questions yet. I hope that I will always be learning; but as a probationer this is still a particular time of learning and discernment. I will try things out and I will get things wrong. The way I do things today won't necessarily be the way I always do things. I need to build my technical knowledge and practice. So you'll see I'm not wearing a clerical collar today, for example. I think sometimes I will wear one and sometimes I won't. Those of you who were there at the circuit welcome service will have seen me wearing one then. That is perhaps the most obvious sign of my experimenting, but I'm sure it won't be the only one.

In the same way, the question of what your ministry will be like is one we can't answer fully today. I don't know what your ministry will be like, and neither will you, even though you will know better than me what your ministry has been like in the past. We'll just have to see. And, more importantly, because this is the whole point really, what will our ministry together be like? Who knows? Won't it be interesting to find out!

What can we discover together in our prayer and in our listening and talking together?  
What can we discover together about God in and around this place?

You may think you're not very good at stepping out into the unknown. You wouldn't be the only one if that's true. I'm not a great one for stepping out into the unknown. Getting to this point where I'm standing in front of you today has not been easy and I don't know how things will unfold from here on. But on a good day I can remember that God loves even me and I can trust in God that somehow what unfolds will be a gift and ultimately a blessing. So let's keep on reminding each other that there are good days and God is love and God loves even us; and so we can put our faith, our trust, in God, and live in hope for an emerging future.