

HURC Mid-week Service (26 August 2020) – led by Jan Dicks

Welcome: Good morning and welcome to this midweek service. First, Elaine is going to play a hymn for us – the words will be on the screen for us to read, but I'm sorry we still aren't allowed to sing them.

Hymn: As we are gathered (Elaine)

Introduction:

My theme this morning is "finding God unexpectedly". I'm going to tell you about two people whose art spoke to me of God, even though I wasn't expecting them to. On both occasions, I happen to have been in Australia, though there is otherwise no connection with Australia. I wonder if perhaps my mind is more open to listening for God when I'm on holiday – my mind is free of the many things which always seem to be running through it when I'm at home.

Before I tell you about the first piece of art, let's listen to a Bible passage which speaks of one of the many occasions when God chooses an unexpected person to be a spokesperson for Him.

Bible Reading:

I Samuel 16, 1 – 13

Message Part 1:

Just as Jesse was surprised that his youngest son, David, was the one chosen to be king, I think you will be surprised when I tell you that the first piece of art which I want to talk about is by Tracey Emin. I suppose Tracey Emin is most famous, or perhaps infamous, for her piece entitled "My Bed". However, since the 2000s she has created many installations in neon handwriting, many of which can be understood on several different levels of meaning. When I was in Australia in February, I was listening to BBC Radio 4's Sunday Worship when I heard about Tracey Emin's installation in Liverpool Cathedral. entitled "For You".

As you can see on the screen, it's a single sentence in pink neon, in her own handwriting, and it reads "I Felt You And I Knew You Loved me.

Although when I heard about it on the radio I hadn't seen a picture of it, I was struck by those words, and I bring you now some information about it I found on Google, some views I heard on the radio programme and some thoughts of my own.

The installation is positioned under the large west window and is visible from almost everywhere in the cathedral, either wholly or in part. It keeps reappearing as you walk around the space and becomes almost like a mantra, reminding us gently of the most important thing about faith and the most important and noble thing about human beings - our capacity for love.

"I felt you and I knew you loved me" is a deliberately ambiguous statement. The verb 'to feel' can describe the result of your own action, or the result of someone else's. You can feel someone by reaching out to touch them, as when the woman in the Gospels with unstoppable bleeding reaches out to touch the hem of Jesus's garment, And you can feel someone because they touch you. Which is it here? Both are possible, and the speaker on the radio programme pointed out that this double possibility is heightened by the fact that you can read the words from left to right, like

a sentence, or from the outer panels towards the centre, like a traditional painted triptych. So you could read "I felt you and I knew you loved me" or "I felt you. You loved me. And I knew" – a subtle difference.

When it was installed in 2008 Tracy Emin said that she wanted to "make something for Liverpool cathedral about love and the sharing of love" and I think she has succeeded. Everything in Liverpool Anglican Cathedral was placed there to express love of God and her work opens up this truth so that all people, of any faith and none, can think about what is the best part of us all. Its title, For You, is a very personal one and it reminds us that love is a gift, and the personal nature of the gift is emphasised by the fact that the words are written in handwriting.

Although we might be of the opinion that this art work can't compare with some of the paintings of earlier centuries such as Holman Hunt's "The Light of the World" or Da Vinci's "The Last Supper", I personally feel that this installation is more accessible to many people who might not understand the context of earlier religious paintings. It might well act as an entry point to a contemplation of God by those who would not normally enter a place of worship. It seems to me to have meaning for anyone who sees it.

Hymn: Now Elaine will play "Be still and know that I am God".

Prayer Time

Before I tell you about the second piece of art which spoke to me unexpectedly, we will have a short time of prayer.

Let us pray:

First a prayer by Jane Bower taken from this year's URC Prayer Handbook. In this prayer, it's hard to change the pronouns I and me to you, but I pray it on behalf of us all.

Help me to See

God of unlikely choices,
nudge me when, even fleetingly,
I dismiss someone as being less than myself.
Help me to see that by this attitude
I lessen myself.
Remind me that you
Are in each one of your people;
That as I look at each one
I am looking at you.

God who pays no attention to outward appearances,
Who does not see as humans see,
Forgive me when I look only at the surface
And not into the heart;
When I think I see clearly,
But don't recognise my own blind spots, my limited sight.
Open my eyes to see as you do.

Guide me to discern what pleases you.
Thank you for the times I get it right.
Lead me clearly when I get it wrong.

God of endless patience, thank you
That despite my many flaws
Still you see my full potential, and still you choose me.

And now let us bring to God all those in our blue prayer book.

As I mention them by name, please imagine them surrounded by a circle of God's healing light, and if we don't know them, let us imagine their name written in pink neon handwriting and let us pray that they will feel God and know that He loves them.

Streets of Hadleigh this week - Gallows Hill, Brunskill Place, Bridge Street and Corks Lane.

Finally let us bring our world to God, with all its problems, and especially at this time with the problems of Covid 19 and let us place it in God's healing light.

Hymn: And now let us continue our time of prayer with the next hymn as Elaine plays and we pray the words silently. "Father I place into your hands"

Message Part 2:

The second artist who spoke to me unexpectedly was not a painter, but a composer and singer – it was Leonard Cohen. Again, it was when I was in Australia and this time it was in January 2017. When I was younger, I had never really liked Leonard Cohen's music – I think it was because I found it quite depressing – but I don't think I'd ever really listened to the words. Anyway, on this particular day, it was a Sunday and I had actually managed to get to church – quite a hard thing to do when I'm staying with my family as there are always sporting events to attend with the grandchildren. I like to go to Pitt Street Uniting church right in the middle of Sydney, and every week as well as two Bible readings they always have a contemporary reading. On this particular occasion they had a contemporary song – "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen. If you don't know it, it doesn't matter, the words which are important are

"Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in."

Something about those words struck home. And co-incidentally, the following month, February 2017, there was an article in Reform magazine about Leonard Cohen by Lawrence Moore, formerly director of the Windermere Centre and now Mission & Discipleship consultant. He said that when he heard Leonard Cohen sing these words, he suddenly understood what grace really means. For Lawrence Moore, the word light is written with a capital letter, and he explains that what he hears in these words is that our brokenness and imperfections aren't the barrier that keeps God out, but they are the door through which God comes in. And let us pray that they are also the cracks where the love of God can shine out. So let us reflect on the fact that, as Lawrence Moore says in his article, Cohen, an Ashkenazi Jew and Zen Buddhist monk has written what he finds to be the most

theologically nourishing and Christian of songs. And let us thank God for unexpected people who help us to glimpse the divine.

So let us end our time of worship as we listen to "Anthem" by Leonard Cohen. It's quite long – about 6 minutes, so please feel free to leave before the end if you wish.

Blessing:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all now and evermore.

Amen