

Advent Message

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23)

Rutger Bregman is currently delivering the Reith Lectures on Radio 4. His second book; *Humankind*, was read by some of us at Chepstow Methodist Church in South Wales. The premise of the book is that the default position of human beings is kindness, that when push-comes-to-shove our instinct for kindness to others kicks in.

This can seem counter-intuitive in our war-ridden world, but he gives many examples that resonate and harking back to the 'covid-spirit' we lived through, we were able to see how kindness can transform streets and communities.

Yuval Noah Harari, who wrote the sometimes-controversial *Sapiens*, said of Bregman's book; 'Made me see humanity from a fresh perspective.' It is worth considering as a Christmas present for someone!

His Reith lectures are talking about how 'elites' abuse the power invested in them and that it is up to us at the middle and bottom, of community and society, to push back against this. Bregman's humanistic approach (his father was a Lutheran Pastor but Bregman struggles to believe in God as Christians perceive God to be) strikes a chord with me ... because this is what, to me, Jesus is all about.

Jesus, the one we patiently wait for throughout Advent, Emmanuel who joins with humankind, knitting us together in communities of grace and love, seeking healing and peace in this world, alongside those in the middle and bottom. Jesus who constantly berated the religious authorities in an anti-elitist way that drew a following from the poorest and artisan classes. Jesus, who, in his resurrected state, breathed the primal Spirit of God into his disciples and, once ascended, unleashed this Spirit into every corner of the world as the Spirit filled and Spirit led Church emerged and continues to thrive across the world today. Those *fruits* of the Spirit that fill and guide each of us day by day.

This brings us back to Advent. A time of reflection, an opportunity to think in a different way as we prepare for a new liturgical year. The theme of Advent in the Methodist Church this year is 'You are a gift.'

It is easy to fall into the Black Friday trap of focussing on gifts as material, gold, frankincense and myrrh, that we give unto others on Christmas Day. Symbolic gifts given to the Christ child who grew in wisdom and grace to embody the fullness of God. If we focus on the symbols (gold for kingship – frankincense for his divinity or priestly role and myrrh signifying his

suffering and sacrifice), hallelujah, we have Jesus in our midst, yet we can be in danger of missing out in the real world in which we live.

We live in society (yes, Mrs. Thatcher, there is a thing called society) in communities beyond family ties. These communities are neighbours, work colleagues, fellow singers, congregations, on-line etc. and these communities form the bedrock of society that enables children and adults to be educated, cared for, supported and, sometimes, locked up when they fall short of this mark we expect as people living together. This society is made up of you and me.

You are a gift.

We all have gifts to share and use to build up one another and let God's will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Regardless of faith, humankind using their gifts brings cohesion, harmony, healing and enables a sense of belonging and love.

Your gift may be (Romans 12:7-8) prophecy, bringing alive the Word of God, or serving, giving unto others, or teaching, or encouraging, or leading or giving financially, or you may have the gift of mercy, or any combination of these. There are probably many other St. Paul misses out, but please remember ... **You are a gift** ... and THANK YOU for using those gifts in your church, your family, your workplace, your street, your club. We are not 'the elite' lording it over others, we are the salt of the earth, bringing light into this world, enabling those who walk in darkness to know that the Light of the World has stepped into their darkness and will set them free.

You are a gift ... and reflect this Advent on how you may share your grace given gifts evermore in these days and years ahead.

Gordon