**Walking with Micah Consultation (online)**

**3rd November 2022**

**Keynote: Justice**

**Revd. Dr. Joanne Cox-Darling**

Good morning everyone, and on your behalf, I firstly want to thank Rachel and her team for planning and running this event, and coping with the numerous pivots that have impacted on your work. Thank you for this opportunity to share together in the work of Social Holiness and Social Justice in the Methodist Church and for all the work going on behind our screens to enable us to participate well together.

I want to begin this morning by committing a clergy sin, and talking about my family – or more specifically my oldest daughter. I do this with permission and with additional pocket money negotiated (the current rate is £1.50 per story).

My oldest daughter is nearly 7 years old. I love being her mum because she teaches me a lot about not taking things for granted. She is the child in the class with a thousand questions – some of which she can’t unlock quickly, so you have to be focussed and present with her until she has connected everything together.

She is the child in the class who has to learn the patterns of expected behaviour – and then sees to it that everyone conforms. She can seem that she is a bit of a tale-teller – but when you get to know her, it’s because she is trying really hard to understand how to behave that she wants everyone else to do the same.

She is also one of the most passionate people when it comes to justice.

Whether it’s the times her sister cheats at the board game ‘Guess Who’, or when she gets into trouble because there was an aeroplane in the sky and she forgot to come into the classroom at the end of playtime – she has a deep, central-to-her-being, bubbly and effervescent, oftentimes shouty, sometimes angry, occasionally uncontrollable, sense of justice.

She understands right and wrong, and will fight for what she knows is right.

She sees people and responds to their physical need, (she is the first to fetch me a blanket when I’m cold.)

largely because she has to ask what’s wrong because he doesn’t always understand people’s expressions or behaviour.

She will stand up for her friends, advocating on their behalf.

She wants to reach out, and she will almost always be connected to me or my husband – holding our hands, or stroking our feet.

She asks really good questions about how the world, which often accidentally exposes propaganda and false information in a brilliant and unnerving sort of way.

I’m proud to be her mum for the following reasons:

She reminds me that justice isn’t something that can be taught. It’s part of who she is, and it is her frame of existence.

She reminds me that young people just get this stuff. Social action isn’t just what she does, justice and inclusion is who she is. As Martyn Joseph wrote,

Here come the young

With open minds and hearts

Inclusive from the start

Here come the young

Here come the young

They might just save the day

Best get out the way

Here come the young

<https://youtu.be/OiTrpaPnMYE>

In our postmodern world, for our young adults, children, and youth – justice, inclusion, and belonging, is the measure for engagement and participation. You only need to look at the influence of Greta Thunberg and the youth climate movement to see this in action.

My daughter (as well as Ms Thunberg) also show us that living with neurodiversity is a superpower to those of us trying to manage and lead within the inherited structures. I shouldn’t have to describe why it’s OK that people are travelling across continents and oceans for freedom from oppression; or why we need more blankets rather than putting the heating on at home. The status quo doesn’t make sense, and life isn’t fair, and suffering and brokenness should not be normal.

On a good day, I dare to believe that those who are neurodiverse introduce us to the Kingdom of God – not conformed to the patterns of this world, but transformative and able to expose tarnished experiences to the alchemy of truth and justice and grace.

Sometimes she just reminds me to duck out of the way as stuff is thrown across the room and I confess to doubting my empathy.

Ultimately, my daughter reminds me that justice is messy. It can be bubbling under the surface – but it can also be passionate, fierce, angry, uncontrollable and on really really big shouty days – justice can be violent.

This shouldn’t come as a surprise.

In a different time and place the prophet Amos recites God’s words of judgement:

‘Away with the noise of your songs!

I will not listen to the music of your harps.

But let justice roll on like a river,

Righteousness like a never-falling stream!’ Amos 5:19-20

It’s tempting to imagine that this is an image of a small creek that just trickles even when it’s in full flow.

But this isn’t the imagery that God is using here. God is passionate and is having a very big shouty day albeit through Amos.

This is not calm and contained. This is an image of uncontrollable force – the Niagara Falls of God’s justice – rolling on like a river.

If God’s justice is this awesome, awe-inspiring, and powerful - perhaps we need to do three things.

Firstly – if God’s justice is this awesome – then when did we forget that for Wesley, social justice WAS evangelism…I might tentatively suggest that engaging in the transformation of areas of systemic injustice is for many, a converting experience in itself.

I’ve grown up in an evangelical tradition of conversion through conversation and declaration of belief statements. But what if the genius of our Methodist tradition has always been that social justice is also converting experience of grace…dare I say even a vital part of faith formation and expression.

Faith without social justice isn’t actually faith at all.

"A church that finds its life only in prayers and sacraments and liturgical acts ... which do not reflect its responsible faith in the world of injustice and exploitation is a failed church. It never fulfils its call and commission to be the sign and sacrament of the coming kingdom. In such a situation, faith gets fossilised, practice becomes imperialised, and the community becomes closed and triumphalistic." Y. T. Vinayaraj

I want to confess my part in perpetuating the separation of mission and social action as separate expressions of faith formation and discipleship. As the God for All strategy helps us to remember – we are part of a justice seeking, inclusive, growing, evangelistic – Methodist Church. These things aren’t pick and mix. These are who we are, and what we do, and how we include and inspire others to join in too.

The best social justice, after all, empowers those who have received an injustice, as well as advocates on their behalf.

Secondly – I want to suggest that there is a difference between social action and social justice.

I love that Methodists at their heart want to make the world a better place.

Provocatively, however, I wonder when it was that I lost this sense of justice rolling like a river, and make the white-water rapids of the work of God’s justice – sanitised and safe. I know that it’s far easier for me to put a pack of pasta into the food bank donation box at the back of church, sponsor a child, twin all the manse toilets (twice), and put All We Can into my Will – than it is to begin unpicking the causes of poverty in this country – let alone around the world. In turn we become complicit in additional systems of injury and injustice.

Social action is good, and can make us feel good to. We feel as though we are doing something to help.

As Desmond Tutu said, however, we can spend all our time picking people out of the water once they’ve fallen in, we never go upstream to see why they are falling in, in the first place.

Social justice does that deeper, bigger, wider, engagement to ask what needs to change so that people and the created order all thrive and flourish.

Thirdly, I wonder whether we need more ecological rather than economic models and language in every sphere of life. If justice rolls down like a river, after all – perhaps there is much to learn from the meandering of riverbeds, and the movement of the physical geography beneath our feet. At its best, perhaps the whole earth plays part of bringing about God’s justice - as well as being a recipient of God’s justice.

What if an ecology of justice meant that everyone and everything has agency – the possibility of being part of bringing in the Kingdom of God, as well as being in need of God’s justice and God’s grace.

If we saw power as ecological rather than economic would it be able to give it away and still maintain agency

If we saw people as part of an ecology of flourishing rather than economy of contribution - would we send refugees to Rwanda

If we saw mission as ecological rather than economic would we still be exhausting ourselves looking after buildings still fit for the Nineteeth century

If we saw healthcare as ecological rather than economic would we use the term ‘clinically extremely vulnerable’ as a euphemism for dispensible

If we saw education as ecological rather than economic would we test 6 and 9 year olds, and determine the future of our now crumbling teenagers with exams over coursework

If we saw climate change as ecological rather than economic would we be pushing back our Paris agreement targets to 2050 and would our leaders fail to attend COP27 in favour of the G20 summit?

Haven’t even considered what an ecology of the cost of living crisis would look like – other than I doubt it would start with a list of all the places children can eat free over the holidays as long as they are accompanied by a paying adult.

Ecological models and ideas, metaphors and practices – offer us a way to describe flourishing and growth without removing the experiences of pain and fear which so often drowns out hope and masks justice in a cloak of sympathetic social action.

My daughter is nearly 7 years old.

She is passionate and fierce and gets angry, and doesn’t understand why things have to be the way they are.

She is teaching me that things don’t have to be this way.

Through her, I dare to think that God is teaching me something of the Kingdom of God. A kingdom of misfits and prophets and weird people and the broken and the broken-but-still-hopeful – who dare to suggest that things don’t have to be this way; and do so whilst reading scripture, praying deeply, seeking out community, supporting the foodbank, building relationships with local politicians, considering the ethics of consumption, and inviting more and more people to the Table:

In the words of Henry Scott Holland:

**HP409 Judge Eternal, throned in splendour,**

Lord of lords and King of kings,

with your living fire of judgment

purge this land of bitter things;

solace all its wide dominion

with the healing of your wings.

Still the weary folk are pining

for the hour that brings release,

and the city’s crowded clangor

cries aloud for sin to cease,

and the homesteads and the woodlands

plead in silence for their peace.

Crown, O God, your own endeavour;

cleave our darkness with your sword;

feed the faithless and the hungry

with the richness of your word;

cleanse the body of this nation

through the glory of the Lord.