

*Ten days after the referendum which saw a majority of voters decide that the United Kingdom should leave the European Union, Rev Nik Wooller preached the following sermon addressing some worrying issues that had emerged during the debate and after the vote:*

### **Sermon by Rev Nik Wooller on 10 July 2016**

Last week the 2016 Annual Conference of the Methodist Church passed a resolution containing the following text which I have been asked to share with you:

The United Kingdom, as a result of the referendum on 23 June 2016, has voted to leave the European Union. In this time of very significant change and uncertainty there is a need for leadership which seeks the common good and encourages people to work together, to respect one another and to uphold the dignity of all.

The Methodist Conference believes that the British Isles are enriched by diversity and celebrates the contribution made by those who have come from other parts of the world.

The Christian tradition calls for respect, tolerance, love of neighbour and hospitality to the stranger. All bear the responsibility of speaking and acting for healing, reconciliation, and mutual respect.

The Methodist Conference abhors and deeply regrets those actions and words which incite hatred and lead to the victimisation of groups within society and notes with concern that such actions and words have been normalised in recent public discourse. Believing that racism is a denial of the gospel and that to stay silent when others are abused is to collude with those who seek to promote hatred and division, the Methodist Conference calls:

- on the Methodist people to challenge racism and discrimination
- for a political debate which neither demonises any nor leaves the vulnerable (the foreigner, the immigrant and refugee) in danger of victimisation.
- on political leaders to work together for the good of the whole community putting the needs of the nation before party politics.
- on all those in positions of power and authority to hear the voices of those who have been marginalised and alienated

and to respond to them in ways which offer real hope for the future.

The Methodist church's timely statement is very welcome as the debate about Britain's future was marked by blatant anti-immigrant rhetoric. And since last week's vote in which the Leave side was ultimately victorious - for Brexit, as the UK decision to leave the European Union is called - there's been a significant increase in hate crimes. According to the National Police Chief's Council, reported hate crimes have jumped alarmingly since the vote.

But while it might seem that the world is full of such terrible news these days, from post-Brexit UK comes a tiny point of light. In response to an open environment of hatred, many people across the UK are now wearing safety pins to show solidarity with immigrants and to demonstrate their stance against racism.

Many are tweeting pictures of themselves wearing the safety pins in an act of solidarity with immigrants. This campaign, which has gone viral, was started by an American woman living in this country. She told the media that as a white woman she doesn't often get the same hate as other immigrants.

"I'm always having to remind people I'm an immigrant," she said. "You know, I'm white and speak English as a first language so I get a pass. They say 'Oh you don't count, you're not the kind of person we're talking about.'"

The safety-pin idea was inspired by a movement which started in Australia last year after a gunman stormed a Sydney cafe and took hostages. Among his demands was to be brought an ISIS flag, leading to concerns about an anti-Muslim backlash. A woman posted on Facebook the story of a woman she'd seen on public transport silently removing her hijab to avoid attention, the hashtags #illridewithyou and #ridewithyou attracted wide support,

and started trending worldwide. Australians and people all over the world offered to travel to work with people who didn't want to travel alone and wanted the protection of company. And so the Hashtag Ride With Me campaign began.

The woman who started the safety pin idea in Britain (who goes by the name @cheetahs on Twitter) said she hopes the safety pins will be a real sign to people who may feel threatened that there are allies around.

She told the media: "It's just a little signal to people facing hate crimes to show them that they're not alone and their right to be in the UK is supported." The little signal has now taken off like wildfire.

While this campaign was a bright spot of spontaneous inclusion through social media, there were questions about how it might translate into real action. Some have pointed out that wearing a safety pin actually might not do a lot to fight racism and xenophobia. Critics argue that "hashtag activism" allows people to *feel* they've done something without actually *doing* anything tangible. Others, however, say that social media campaigns are a vital organising tactic that can have a widespread impact. This certainly seems to be the outcome that supporters of #safetypin, including its originator, are hoping for. On its own, she tweeted, the safety pin means very little. It needs to be accompanied by both a decision both to actively speak out against public acts of violence, racism, and xenophobia, and also a decision to listen actively to those who have been marginalised.

She continued: "The first step is just getting it out in the open. The more people you start a conversation with, the easier it is to combat violence and abuse."

All this reminds us of the parable from the Gospel of Luke

(10:25-37), the best known of all the stories Jesus told. Even the least churched among society recognise it. The language of the "Good Samaritan" is a part of our culture's working vocabulary. For example, we have an entire section of legal code known as Good Samaritan Laws. The laws protect from liability anyone who chooses to help another person in some kind of distress. Their intent is to encourage bystanders to offer assistance to strangers in need, to be Good Samaritans. It is an important and noble objective. But it also represents a simplistic interpretation that misses most of the complexity and richness of the story that gave the laws their name. The story says much more than the laws. Remember that.

When I was at theological college, as part of a fascinating and very practical course on Death and Dying, I shadowed the chaplain at a local hospital during the late-night hours each Thursday. One Thursday, I arrived to find her standing in the office doorway, coat on and bag in her hand ... a family emergency ... she would be back as soon as she could ... in the meantime, here's the pager ... you'll know what to do.

Thirty relatively quiet minutes later, the pager lit up. I made the call. A man had just died and the family was asking for a chaplain. I gathered my strength and walked toward the elevator. I remember the feelings of inadequacy and fear that overwhelmed me. What would I say to comfort a family that had just lost a father, a husband, a grandfather? What were the magic words that they needed to hear from me? Which textbook example best fitted this real-world situation? I arrived outside the intensive-care unit and found six family members gathered. After introducing myself, I froze. What to say next? The man standing next to me said: "He was a good man and a great father. He worked so hard but always had time for us. Another family member chimed in with a story about a family holiday. Everyone laughed over the

time they had convinced this strait-laced grandfather to ride a roller-coaster with his granddaughter. "Do you remember when...?" and the stories kept coming. Two hours later, the family graciously thanked me for coming, though all I'd done was to listen. As I walked out of the waiting room, I promised to myself that I would never forget the power of stories to recreate, comfort, and give hope - even in the most difficult of times.

When we encounter Jesus in the tenth chapter of Luke, he is on his way to the cross. The writer of the Gospel has made that perfectly clear in the previous chapter with this ominous line: he set his face to go to Jerusalem. Jesus is headed for the Holy City. This journey, and the people Jesus meets along the way, provide the backdrop for many of his most memorable stories.

Ours begins when a lawyer, an expert in the Law of Moses stands up to test Jesus. Like the Pharisees, who were his colleagues, the lawyer wants to know if Jesus will properly use the Torah to answer this weighty question: What must I do to inherit eternal life? Chapter and verse, please.

But this is Jesus. This is the gospel of Luke. Anyone expecting or demanding a direct answer is bound to be disappointed.

Instead, Jesus, answers a question with another question. What is written in the law? What do you read there that might address your question? Now perhaps Jesus wants to respond to the test offered by the lawyer with a test of his own, to see if the lawyer really knows what is in the law, a kind of bar exam pop quiz. Perhaps this is his goal, but it seems to me that the question serves a much deeper purpose. It invites the lawyer a little closer, forcing him to put his cards on the table. The invitation to dialogue recognises relationships and mutuality. What do you think is the answer?

Of all the intimidating and anxiety-producing settings in which I've ever spoken, there is none that matches the appointment I used to have, in my previous circuit, while we were without a minister, on the second Wednesday of each month at 9:15 in the morning - preschool chapel. On one visit, I began our time together by asking the children a question - what do you want to be when you grow up? The answers were wonderful - lots of teachers and firefighters, even a pirate and a princess in the crowd. But then one of the four-year-olds raised her hand. "Nik, what do you want to be when you grow up?" There was something so wonderful, and terrifying, about having my question returned to me .. invited to join the conversation .. compelled to take a stand.

"What must I do to inherit eternal life?" the lawyer asks. "You tell me," Jesus responds. Since we are dealing with a legal professional, we can expect a thoughtful answer. As if he'd been waiting for the opportunity all along, the lawyer quickly combines two different verses of Hebrew scripture and ends up with a comprehensive statement of proper ethical conduct: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbour as yourself."

Jesus applauds the answer, but he is not finished, and pulls his conversation partner just a little closer to the place where proper words and proper actions meet. He then offers a surprisingly simple summary statement: "Do this and you will live."

At this point in the encounter, we've come to a crossroads for the lawyer. Either he will roll his eyes, thank Jesus for this apparently fruitless conversation, and move on, or he will take the bait.

Well, the lawyer is hooked. We know this because Luke takes time to share the intentions behind his questions.

The purpose of the initial question - what must I do to inherit eternal life - was to test Jesus. But this time around the question has a different purpose. He wants to justify himself. Though the word justify is most often read with a tone of self-righteousness, it doesn't have to be that way. The lawyer no longer wants to test Jesus. He wants to test himself. How can I be justified? Who is **my** neighbour? The question has an air of urgency, and Jesus responds with a story.

"And he told the crowds all these things in parables; without a parable he told them nothing." The gospel writer Matthew got it right. When Jesus confronts a heavy question he does so not with propositional assertions or creedal statements, but through the telling of stories. Let me tell you a story: A sower went out to sow. Someone gave a great dinner and invited many guests. It is as if there are some truths so profound that only a story can describe them, so personal and transformational that only a story will convey the message. A story has the capacity to create community and to reshape the alert and interested hearer.

Just before bedtime, the young child turns to her grandfather, "Tell me a story." "What kind of story would you like to hear?" he asks. "One with me in it."

Jesus tells this lawyer a story. One with his new friend in it. Two experts in the Torah walk by a beaten and nearly dead man on the side of the road. They know the commandments, to love God and neighbour, even have them memorised. But they don't stop to help a stranger at the point of death. The twist comes with the third traveller - a Samaritan, an outsider, one whose interpretation of Leviticus and Deuteronomy make the lawyer's blood boil. This Samaritan shows the man in need hospitality and kindness and mercy and generosity in the extreme. Two perfect stand-ins for our inquisitive lawyer walk right by, and his sworn theological enemy does the right thing.

The lawyer had requested a definition of neighbour; he receives a description of mercy. The story hits very close to home, exposing the distance between answers and actions. The lawyer is left with the most soul-searching question of all. Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?

On the surface, it's an easy answer. The Samaritan. But that is not what the lawyer says. His answer is now broader because his understanding of the question is deeper. The one who showed him mercy. This general description of a very specific character leaves the door open for the lawyer. Perhaps he too could be the Samaritan. What was unthinkable only moments ago is now a possibility. Because of the story, everything can be different. The lawyer can change roles. He can go and do likewise.

We need to remember now more than ever that we are followers of Jesus Christ. Our art is storytelling. Our deepest truths begin with phrases like: "There was a man who had two sons..." or "A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...." We are called to tell the story of Jesus Christ and how his story has changed ours. These ancient stories of scripture are so powerful because we are in them. They encounter us where we are and they transform us.

We are not told how the dialogue between Jesus and the lawyer ended. I like to imagine a new disciple following Jesus down the road to Jerusalem, sharing the story that changed his life with every person he meets.

At the church where I grew up, we used to sing that beautiful hymn "tell me the old old story." Maybe you remember

So clear your throats, sisters and brothers. The time has

come. It is our turn, to tell the old, old stories that still have the power to transform our lives and remake our broken world.

Amen.

“Tell me the old, old story,  
Of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory,  
Of Jesus and His love;  
Tell me the story simply,  
As to a little child,  
For I am weak and weary,  
And helpless and defiled.”