**Professor David Reynolds and Revd Nigel Uden on 26th January 2025**

**Readings:** *I Corinthians 12.12-20; Habakkuk 3.17-19; Matthew 5. 9 & 43-45*

**World Church Sunday**

*On 26th January 2025, the World Church Sunday service at Downing Place URC was organised by members of the church's World Church and Public Issues (WCPI) Group. The service was led by the WCPI Group convenor, David Reynolds, and DPURC minister Nigel Uden. The service included three 'conversations' between David and Nigel: these focused on the church in South Africa; in Cuba; and in Israel and Palestine.*

*The text of these conversations now follows, together with three related readings from scripture.*

David Reynolds: A very warm welcome to World Church Sunday – a special moment in the year when we at Downing Place explore and celebrate the dynamism of Christianity worldwide.

Our forebears in the faith took pride in the work of Christian missionaries going out from Britain to carry the Gospel across the world. Some of those men and women are remembered on the boards in the Gibson Hall. Take a look when you're having coffee. In the 21st century, however, we see the work of mission as global and interactive, allowing us to learn from Christians in other parts of the world.

This is the last World Church Sunday of Nigel's ministry at Downing Place. So the World Church & Public Issues Group – which is responsible for today's service – felt it would be appropriate to draw out his reflections about what he has seen, heard and learnt from the World Church during more than forty years as an ordained minister.

There isn't time to take in all his experiences – he's been all over the place – so he and I will confine ourselves to three particular places – South Africa during and after apartheid; the island of Cuba, as the Castro regime evolved; and the tragedy of Israel/Palestine – which seems like a Holy Land merely in name. We should also remember that tomorrow (27 January) is Holocaust Memorial Day, which only adds to our anguish and incomprehension.

Reading: I Corinthians 12

12 For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. 13 For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. 14 Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15 If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16 And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. 17 If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? 18 But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. 19 If all were a single member, where would the body be? 20 As it is, there are many members, yet one body.

David: So, we started, if you like, by refracting the world church through the experience of people here in the congregation today. Now we're going to focus more closely on one person and one person's experience of the World Church.

Nigel, we're going to talk first of all about South Africa.

As I understand it, you were there for the first time in 1983 as a student minister; you were then there for a longer period, from 1987 to 1993 with Bethan, and that's when Jess was born. After that you had short visits in 2011, 2017, and particularly last October for several weeks. So this spans 40 years. How has the church in South Africa changed in that time. Or do you feel it's role really has proved to be just the same over that time?

Nigel Uden: Just before I move into the answer to that question, I want to say that in all of these three conversations there could be so much that could be said, but I think 'less is more', because it's better to have a couple of ideas to hold on to, rather than a broad sweep, which means it's not easy to remember any of them.

So, in terms of this particular question about the changing nature of the church in South Africa, and with South Africans present I'm quite hesitant to say this definitively. And it would be really interesting, over coffee, for us to be able to talk with Ralph, who's from Cape Town, and with Dawn who's relatively recently arrived from Johannesburg, to hear what their experiences are at the moment. But for me, South Africa remains a remarkably religious country. In fact, statistically, we are told only Italy and

the United States of America are countries in which it could be claimed that Christianity is still a growing religion in those countries that used to be part of that sending movement of the church into the world. But my experience of South Africa, which is all I have any right to speak about, is that the church is quite significantly different in those 40 years since I first went there, I think there's been a marked shift away from a church that was very significantly dominated by its colonial heritage into a church that is very particularly more indigenised. It represents the local people's culture and history; those themes and practices of people for whom Southern Africa is where they originate from. And perhaps one could illustrate how different that is in my experience, that in the 80s and 90s when I was working as a minister there, it is well known that the church was a strong and effective voice working for the ending of apartheid. It was driven by the mantra that 'the doctrine of apartheid is a heresy, and the practice of it is a sin', and because so many opposition voices were silenced at that time, the church was a very profound and effective voice that was to some degree more tolerated. It was certainly globally respected, supported and funded, and I don't think that anybody who analyses that second half of the 20th century in terms of South African history would want to deny the significance of the place of the church. Those churches of the inherited tradition continue. They continue to be very effective, but interestingly my experience, particularly when I went last year, was that so many voices said to me from those churches that they're experiencing the same real shift in society that we are experiencing here. Fewer people are finding those inherited traditional churches like us and Methodism and Anglicanism, fewer people are finding those the expression of religious faith that they find most helpful. And what is happening with this indigenization is that the practices of religion are also being redefined, it can lead in many places to the adoption of the more Pentecostal understanding of religion, a more conservative approach to it but mixed, and this is where it can become quite complicated, with a more traditional understanding of religion and the desire to try and mix together an Orthodox understanding of Christianity with a more African sort of religion. And this has meant that nowadays, the church has two very particular voices, there is still the voice crying out for justice, particularly at the moment against corruption, but there's also a voice that is more in terms of the prosperity gospel, more looking for individual liberty and for that sort of identity politics that's so personalises religion, that it loses some of its impact as the salt and light in society. But finally, in terms of this sort of sense of how the church is in South Africa today, my own experience is that it remains in all sorts of ways a voice for Jesus. Just as there are so many official languages in South Africa, so there are countless voices for Jesus, but I think each in their own way they're trying to say what the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa was trying to say in the midst of the apartheid, when I arrived there in 1983, '*Jesus is die Antwoord',* 'Jesus is the answer': that Jesus is the answer to our personal situations, to the world's ills, because it's through Jesus that the church is able to offer to the world God's gifts of grace and truth, of forgiveness and of life, not only beyond the grave, but this side of the grave as well.

I think this next hymn, which I learned when I was in South Africa, is summing up, from a Methodist voice in Cape Town a generation ago, this idea of Jesus being the answer because in its last verse we find Christ is enough to break barriers, enough to build the nation, enough for death, for life, enough for one and for all. So, we're going to stand and sing two verses of John Gardner's hymn, 'Who will save our land and people?'

*Hymn*: Wo will save our land and people? [John Brett Gardner 1930- ]

Reading: Habakkuk 3

17 Though the fig tree does not blossom, and no fruit is on the vines; though the produce of the olive fails and the fields yield no food; though the flock is cut off from the fold and there is no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will exult in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the feet of a deer, and makes me tread upon the heights.

David: So now we move on to Cuba, Castro's Cuba – and that may seem like a strange choice. Fidel Castro led the revolution of 1959 that overthrew the US client regime. He then established a one-party communist state of which he was President until deteriorating health led to his retirement in 2008. But the family dynasty has carried on.

In Britain, Fidel is probably most remembered for accepting Soviet nuclear missiles into his island in 1962, an island that's of course only 90 miles off the coast of Florida. Very, very close to the US. For a

few days, as many of us in the congregation can recall, there was a sense that the world was at the precipice edge of World War Three.

Nigel, this sounds like an atheistic, war-like country. where did you sense God's work when you visited Cuba in, I think, 2002.

Nigel: Yes, my visit was over 20 years ago and I valued what it taught then. And I want to make it really clear that these are the lessons I learned then. This isn't a reflection upon what the church in Cuba is today, and it's important to underline that precisely because of what I did learn in 2002. As David has said, the church in Cuba was persecuted after Fidel Castro's government came to power in 1959. It was *so* persecuted that many, many practicing Christians left Cuba in the years after 1959, and they went most significantly to the United States of America. The church that remained, and of course many did, but for those who remained the persecution continued in the early years of what they call Fidelism. The church was profoundly oppressed and kept out of any really effective life and work. But there was a gradual change in the way in which the church in Cuba was regarded by the Castro government. There came to be a sense that maybe people needed what the church was offering. Whether the Castro government understood that as a spiritual need or as a physical need to help them with the daily things of life is an interesting question, but as the years went by they certainly recognised that they needed the church to do what the government couldn't do, what the state couldn't provide. So, ministries amongst young people, youth work, children's work, ministry amongst old people, supporting the elderly, particularly as people became more and more dependent. And we also learned when I was there of a special task that the government relied upon the church to offer, which was ministry amongst substance abusing people. It's easy to see that those are the sorts of things that even today, in other parts of the world, governments struggle to provide. They turn to the third sector to provide them and very, very often it's the church that is that instrument, alongside other agencies, offering very significant in work amongst young people, older people and a substance abusing people. Eventually the church was so rehabilitated in Cuban society that the people who left it because it was so persecuted began to return to Cuba, this was in some sense is quite an exciting thing, 40 years on they could go home, 40 years on those who'd let them go could welcome them back. But interestingly, and I wonder if we can recognize this, the ones who had left and returned wanted the church to be the church they had left. They wanted it still to be as they knew it 40 years earlier. They couldn't understand this significant evolution within the way that the church was being the church in Cuba 40 years after they had gone. And the strange thing is that what they remembered was how it was, and they couldn't therefore tolerate very happily the church having changed. So, instead of the division being between the church and the state, there came, at the time that I was there, a really concerning division between the church that was trying to be what it had evolved to become as God used it in Cuba through those decades, and those who wanted it to go back to being what it had been. I'd really like to know what the church in Cuba is like today, and because I don't like speaking about South Africa and being out of date, so keep going back there every five or six years, I'd love to return to Cuba. Nevertheless, what I brought home 20 years ago is that the Christians to whom we spoke who was still within this situation of being barely tolerated even though needed by the state, as they looked back over the years of even worse persecution, they used to quote constantly those words that Andrew read from Habakkuk. When all is grim they clung to God confident that God was still clinging to them. They would quote these prophetic words 'Though the fig tree does not blossom and no fruit is on the vines, yet we will rejoice in the Lord.'. It strikes me that we need that in today's church here when change and the persecution of decline and apathy and of secularism threaten God's power of God's love resurrected and shining, inextinguishable. In our world we need, as our sisters and brothers in the church in Cuba taught me 20 years ago, to rejoice in the Lord even when it feels that the produce of the olive is failing and the fields are yielding no food. That's what Bryn Rees felt in the 1940s in a Congregational manse in Ipswich. During the night raids from German bombers on their way to the Midlands, it could really be frightening in Ipswich. One night in the middle of such a raid, Bryn Rees went to the kitchen table and wrote our next hymn. He never said it was inspired by Habakkuk, but maybe in his subconscious it was, 'Have faith in God, my heart, trust and be unafraid.'.

Reading: Matthew 5

9 'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

43 'You have heard that it was said, "You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy." 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous.

David: And so finally, for our third glimpse of the world church, we come to Israel and Palestine. Because that region has been so much in our minds and hearts and prayers in recent months, it's perhaps difficult to remember the roller coaster that is the longer story of Israel and Palestine since the state of Israel was founded after the war of 1948. So, Nigel, I think it's worth just setting your experiences in that larger context.

You went there in 1997 and 1998, on visits organised by the Council for Christians and Jews. The situation in the 90s was very different from the one we're familiar with today. In 1993, the Oslo Accords between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization, PLO, involved the creation of the Palestinian Authority, as it was called. This was seen as the possible basis for a two-state solution to the long-running problem: Israel and Palestine as two separate states, recognised by each and by the world.

But then in 1995 there occurred the assassination, by an Israeli right-wing extremist, of the prime minister, Yitzhak Rabin. Rabin was a general who became a peacemaker. That's often one of the most effective ways of making peace – when someone who had been a wager of war turns to negotiation and has the credibility to carry people with him. So Rabin's murder dashed those hopes for peace. This was the background to your visits in 1997 and 1998.

Then, Nigel, you went again, I think in 2012 –this time as a co-leader of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. By then the situation had been transformed once more. This was now a period when Israel was very much on the defensive; indeed, it felt acutely vulnerable. By then, the second intifada, the Palestinian uprising of 2000-2005, had taken place and that had forced Israel to withdraw from the Gaza Strip. Given the images we've seen in the last few months, it's easy to forget that Israel had taken Gaza in the Six-Day war of 1967. (That's why it's important to see the recent bout of fighting, that's on our minds now, within a longer, cyclical framework.)

Soon after Israel withdrew in 2005, the Gaza strip became the base for the terrorist group Hamas. That set the scene for years of bombardments and border warfare, which culminated in the horrific Hamas atrocities on 7 October 2023. So, bringing this roller coaster up to date on the eve of Holocaust Memorial Day, it's easier for me to understand why, for so many Israeli Jews, an absolutely firm grip on the 'Promised Land' seems to be their only hope of security, in a world where consistently they have not been able to rely on the Gentiles. For them, that is the abiding lesson of the *Shoa*, the Holocaust, the Nazi project to exterminate the Jews.

But then let's also think of the horrendous images we've seen of the destruction of Gaza – 'Gaza stripped', in the words of an Israeli colleague. Truly haunting words: 'Gaza Stripped'. Then I can imagine the rise of yet another generation of young Palestinians sworn to avenge the loss of their land and their forbears, a cyclical pattern of retribution that dates back to what was, for them, the *Nakba*, or catastrophe of 1948.

This seems like a recipe for war without end. Where Nigel, can you hear the voice of Jesus in all this?

Nigel: Of course, the answer is 'not easily'. And we ought not to surrender to the temptation to be naive, to be almost blindly partisan. David's clear and helpful discussion of how we've got to where we are, surely indicates that we're not simply going to find in the Bible the answer to this problem, because if we were, we'd have found it some millennia ago. We heard Jesus doing his radical thing on the mountainside, and he comes up with this phrase 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. In the moment we have for this comment, it seems to me that we need to let that phrase shape us, wherever our political views are. I know full well that the political views in this room vary quite considerably, but all of us are hearing this Jesus whom we've come to listen for this morning, all of us are hearing him say 'Blessed are the peacemakers'. This is a very clear translation of two words, one of which means 'peace' and the other one means 'to make', that's what this word is, 'to make peace'. So we are faced, as Christian listeners who want to let what we hear shape what we then are, we're left with Jesus saying to us, actively promote peace, make it, it's not something that'll happen if you sit down and just wait for it to happen. 'Be peacemakers'. What Stanley Hauerwas says about those very words is that it's a description

of a way of life, it's about a people of a new age who have been changed by listening to and following this man, Jesus. It's about committing ourselves to live towards a wholeness and well-being that is against any power that hinders other people's wellness, wholeness. And so, if we're going to allow Jesus to inspire us, and indeed to model for us, peace-making, I just want to make four simple suggestions for us to consider.

First, if we want to make peace, that we carefully but deliberately fund appropriate agencies that are working for peace. That is why as a church very recently we went to a lot of trouble to make sure that we funded peace making initiatives in Israel-Palestine that were representative of more than just one argument in that place.

Secondly, that if we want to make peace we need to learn about the situation. Ignorance, commitment to remain ignorant, is about avoiding being a peacemaker; learning is what will help us to know how to be makers of peace.

Thirdly, that we, as people of faith, are given the opportunity to be people of prayer, to listen to what the Spirit is saying to us, not always simply to tell God what God should be doing, but listening to God say radical things into our own hearts.

And finally, it seems to me that what I hear Jesus saying here, when urging us to be peacemakers, is that Jesus challenges us to live peaceably ourselves. When I was a decade or five younger, I learned a worship song that was 'Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me', perhaps that's why Jesus not only said 'Blessed are the peacemakers' but also 'Try to love your enemies.'.

*26th January 2025*