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'The World is My Parish': Glad Tidings of Salvation in an Age of Crisis
Worship and Spirituality, the Revd Canon Dr Jennifer Smith

"God is in Control:" Preaching God's Providence in a Chaotic World

This is offered as a discussion paper opening several related questions for our working group. Among these are reflection on the form (the how, where, by whom, and when) of preaching God's providence as an embodied practice and the theological emphases (the what) in preaching God's providence. The paper is based on reflections written in a sabbatical journal during March – May 2023 in London, England, Lagos, Nigeria, and Argyll and the Western Isles of Scotland. The sabbatical project was a reconsideration of the future of the sermon (and the preacher) as part of the liturgy of the future, in different cultures and contexts. This explains why the reflections are less academic argument than reflective exploration, and why the paper asks more questions than it answers! Thank you for your forbearance.

Introduction: 'God is in control', problems and possibilities

Picture any Sunday morning at Wesley's Chapel in east London in the United Kingdom, as a congregation gathers for worship. Newcomers and visitors settle in pews with more and less comfort, overlooked by the three-meter pulpit built for John Wesley. The organ plays, regular worshippers greet each other, we turn on a livestream and a phone for folk without digital access, stewards hand out orders of service and hymnbooks. News is shared across pews. Someone has a new job or new baby, someone else is bereaved, another has an immigration crisis. People speak about the tumult with political deaths in Malawi, the elections in Iran, the violence of political culture in the USA, the general strike in Nigeria. There is amidst the personal ups and downs a sense of participation in or escape from intractable crisis, as if the best we can hope for is that the violence passes far from where we are in this generation. 'Let it not come here' seems to be our prayer, even when we give thanks.

In our brave new digital reality, there is a recovery of 'aural culture' and a valuing of authenticity.[1] Exercised within and certainly without the liturgy and with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous participation, preaching may yet be a form that makes peace: it can certainly bring violence. We have responsibility and opportunity to resist a 'might makes right' culture of political leadership, and the concurrent economic violence in which people's opinion has value as only commodity, and bodies have value only as consumers or producers. Too often the images of God's power that we choose mimic the mores of power

[1] Roberta Katz, Sarah Ogilvie, Jane Shaw, Linda Woodhead, '*Gen Z, Explained: the art of living in a digital age*,' (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 194-95. Based on a three year qualitative and quantitative study, this report paints a generous portrait of the diverse lexicon and nuanced internal concerns, codes, taboos, and digital cultures among those born after 2000 in the United States and the United Kingdom.

we are seeking to resist: they sell and find easy traction among people used to a culture of violence, seeking a champion, and add to that culture of violence.

I began to notice the comfort offered in a shared text, a semi-liturgical phrase repeated and passed between people as with the authority of scripture: 'God is in control.' I noticed this most acutely when I needed comfort and received this phrase myself as the minister in the church. But what does it mean? I have tried to unpack this phrase with more than one person: of course it has multiple meanings, and flows from and also constructs our most basic understanding of who God is.

I have heard 'God is in control' as shorthand most frequently for 'God is so much bigger than we are, and ours is not to question.' I would like to hear and sometimes do, 'We cannot understand why things happen: trust in the goodness of God and we will be together until the situation changes.' Sometimes I think I hear, 'God sees you, I hope this pain is temporary but it might not be and I don't know what to say. I am with you while God sorts things out.' [2]

Sometimes it also means 'God is bigger and nastier than whatever enemy you are facing and will bring vengeance if you are faithful so don't slip,' or even 'God may be punishing you for something so repent and recommit!' There may also be shades of 'I can't deal with what you are telling me, so I hope God can.' Pause a moment and ask, 'What does the phrase means for you, or in your community?' Are you happy with the implicit theologies of power these represent in your community? In our world of meme and .GIF, images matter. Consider what images of God, or God's providence, your community shares?[3]

This phrase, if we can re-appropriate it and populate it with something more than an emulation of the cultures of power in our violent world, may yet help to liberate from the tyranny of the 'manifestation' culture which is so dominant a wave. Manifestation culture suggests that what we need, to control the outcomes of uncertain futures, is to 'manifest' or think very hard and positively for the thing we hope for. We avoid any acknowledgement of the thing we fear, lest we manifest that outcome instead. A whole industry creates ritual and products to aid this process of 'manifestation,' to cultivate the sense that the ego has power to 'bring something into the world'. When that thing comes, the response is not thanksgiving, but 'appreciation' for what I have manifested. The image I use to illustrate manifestation culture is the 'there's no place like home' clicking of ruby slippers in the Wizard of

[2] https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/653444227157460677/ (visited 11 July 2024)
[3] https://co.pinterest.com/pin/404901822745417962/?amp_client_id=CLIENT_ID%28_%29&mweb_unauth_id=&simplified=true visited 11 July 2024.

Oz: Dorothy has only to realise the power has been with her, not with the putative Wizard, the whole time.[4] When I spoke about this to one young adult from Ghana in my London community, he laughed: 'How is prayer any different? Atleast the prayer I was taught as a child,' he asked. Manifestation is a growing cultural wave, writ large and moving across nations and language groups, soon to be as influential worldwide as the Pentecostal revivals of the last century, except without reference to God. Without dismissing the good tools of positive thinking, and acknowledging the failures of Christian communities to provide plausible alternative theological narratives, this culture ultimately blames those who suffer for their situation, and excuses others from responsibility or accountability for it. If manifestation incorporates a sense of a god figure, it incorporates one who is at best capricious and to be propitiated, at worst disinterested.

As we know, the received and implicit theology of a community (let alone a culture or cultural trend) is rarely straightforward. But whatever else, the phrase 'God is in control' is not neutral. Theologies of power, implicit and explicit are not neutral. 'God is in control' contains an instruction to submit to this present reality as God's work which can supress the obvious question: if God is in control, why are things so hard, for so long, and for so many of us?' Is salvation in the end only a lifeboat for the lucky few untouched by war and carrying the right passports? In the phrase are implicit and explicit images of God which are more and less truthful, and more and less true to our doctrine and tradition. God is not a bigger bully, a stronger warrior among the other warriors: God has changed the game and re-written power, we teach. The multiple meanings of this phrase sit at the busy crossroads of our post-colonial, patriarchal, liberal, Charismatic, catholic, and Wesleyan understandings of God's power and how God enters history, for whom and when.

On the whole, comfort is received as the phrase is passed person to person at Wesley's Chapel, though some may, if they pause to think, experience it as a rebuke for grief, frustration, or anger. Worship begins: we sing, and pray, and listen to scripture and someone steps into the pulpit built for John Wesley and delivers a sermon. Do we engage the questions provoked by this phrase that are simmering just under the surface? In this paper, I want to bring these questions out into the open and then reflect in our discussion on how we can preach into them, not just for individual lives or the life of one church, but for the life of our whole world.

Without doubt, we live in times of global uncertainty and vast danger posed by climate emergency, political extremism and renewed violent conflict between and within nations, and an increasing divide between the global majority without sufficient

[4] https://tenor.com/FBPy.gif visited 18 July 2024. I recently went to an family wedding in Lake Como – the couple asked the entire congregation to undertake a manifestation exercise; in place of a 'grace before the meal, a Kabbalist coach flown from LA asked us to 'appreciate' what the couple had manifested. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/28/style/aggie-lal-jacob-riglin-wedding.html?login=email&auth=login-email Apologies, the full article is behind a paywall – accessed 18 July 2024.

resources for wholesome life, and the minority wealthy western consumers. We know that a sense of the lack of agency, the removal of hope, added to countries with increasingly young demographics provides a seedbed for violence. We have the practical task of preaching God's providence within the liturgy as an alternative theology of power, to counter and subvert accounts of power as capacity for violent control. Without in any way exhausting the answers, I want to open for discussion related questions about the 'what' of preaching (our theological emphases and hermeneutics) and the where, 'by and for whom, and when' of preaching, in a Wesleyan tradition:

- How can we preach God's providence in a global church living with unequal effects of violence in economy and politics?
- How does this project sit within church communities that often do violence themselves to those within, or without, their communities?
- How does this project sit within wider societies less and less likely to ever darken the door of a church, and for whom preaching is often an exercise in personality or personal brand, another monetised voice in the ether vying for market share, views, and likes?
- What helps, and hindrances do our Wesleyan liturgical traditions offer this project?

Our forms and emphases in preaching, as part of the liturgy and worked over time can form individuals and communities to negotiate the temptations of a 'might makes right' culture in and out of churches. They can also reinforce that culture, creating a sense of God at best as simply the biggest bully on the block. Even as we acknowledge an uncertain future for church and experience the attractive strength of violent accounts of power, there is yet hope for the sermon and for the practice of preaching as part of common worship to equip our congregations to make Kingdom-honouring choices in situations which we may not yet be able to imagine or describe.

Preaching as part of liturgy

I joked as Wesley's Chapel navigated the decision to solemnise all marriages in early 2019 that the most significant diversity in the church was not about marriage, but in the far more searching and nuanced variety of what we mean when we say 'God is in control.' If we could live with that diversity, my argument went, we could live with a little difference about marriages. And indeed we can. We regularly invoke metaphors to claim God's power in our prayers and hymns, and refer to it in our preaching. These metaphors matter: it is not just the sermon that builds our understanding of God's providence week on week. They range from the explicit 'Thou [You] whose almighty word, chaos and darkness heard and took their flight,' to the implicit 'Lord have mercy, hear our prayer.' We do not on the whole have conflict in the church meeting over the nature of God's power. Maybe we should. It is not just people in the pews looking to invoke the power of God who want to take comfort from what is described in more technical language as the '…poetic imagination that lets the world be seen as a world where God's ordered intentionality prevails.'[5]

How can we recover a healthy critical theology of power in both the embodied practice and theological emphases of our preaching? My premise is that a preacher can and must listen not only to the scripture, but to the deep implicit theology of

[5] Walter Brueggemann, '*The Practice of Prophetic Imagination: Preaching an Emancipating Word,*' (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), p. 68. 'God is in control' is arguably the more economic phrase.

diverse communities (here, theologies of power, or God's providence), and can make these visible to one another for the purpose of allowing repentance, forgiveness, and new life. I am seeking here to provoke conversation to equip us to do that with greater integrity, humility, and confidence.

Of course the project of revisiting our theology of God's power is necessary in the whole life of our churches: our apologetics, liturgical life, living and service. But this paper is about preaching, and specifically about sermons. There is power explicit and implicit in the embodied act of preaching, which must be negotiated. How does a preacher in some cases literally ten feet above contradiction sit in relation to our theology of God and God's providence? Not to use the power is to allow others to fill the space; to use it is to engage in a perilous act which may yet be necessary. A woman occupying the space of the pulpit, even one arguably cross-dressed in cassock bands gown and hood, is a transgressive presence. 'You have so much more gravitas than most women preachers,' 'I'm so glad you aren't wearing lipstick, I always wonder what a woman preacher is really trying to sell me if she is wearing lipstick.' 'You shouldn't wear your hair pulled back it is so severe you look threatening'(that offered here in Oxford at the last Institute); 'You should make more of yourself: you are quite pretty really – here, I've bought you this lipstick!' As in everything, context matters: I choose to use the titles I have been given, because they were paid for and earned by the women and men of very low power who trained me for the ministry. These are the same ones who taught me to be 'properly dressed,' not least because their experience was that proper dress was important for safety. And I also stand on 30 generations of sinful white privilege, education privilege, class privilege, and considerable entitlement. Accepting a creative tension between our intersectional contexts and working to have the tension remain creative versus becoming toxic, is possible: it requires real relationship, conversation, mutual knowledge and fellowship. As we consider a theology of power, we must ask how the accounts and experience of different groups in our Wesleyan family around the world, not least those of the global south and those with much more experience of needing to grapple with a sense of being forgotten by God, may have to offer those of us who have been able to sustain ignorance of the danger longer.

What parts of our Wesleyan heritage may help us in this project, and can we identify forms and emphases in preaching to help individuals and communities negotiate the temptations of a 'might makes right' culture in and out of churches? Even as acknowledging an uncertain future for church and the strength of violent accounts of power, there is yet hope for the sermon and for the practice of preaching as part of common worship. There is reason to be hopeful about preaching, and about sermons, and even about their part in the project of common worship: it sees opportunities for the sermon preached to model and communicate healthy ethics of power in, and outside of worship and for our times.

The red herring of 'precarity': a necessary caveat

We must acknowledge that a sense of immediate precariousness of the world is nothing new, or that it is only new to those of us who thought that the conflicts of history were over. By 'precariousness,' I mean the awareness of dangers known and unknown and the sense that there is precious little to protect me from harm in the present or the future. What is new is that those of us who have been insulated by entitlement and privilege from the more graphic global hazards are noticing them more. This is not a simple revelation. The process of coming to notice that the sense of security offered by our passports, our skin colour, our membership in a

group or institution was an illusion presents as a loss, even if the loss is of what was in the end, an idol.[6] Perhaps I personally did not have to ask with such stark urgency before what 'God is in control' meant, because I was fairly certain that when I saw a police officer, she was on my side or that I would not be the one pulled over at a road block in a foreign country or followed in a shop at home. I could draw safety from the various governments I dealt with, from environmental and health and safety legislation, from the courts, or even from my church institutions.

In preaching then, a first watchword is to name this loss in mixed congregations, with truth-telling, humour, humility and nuance: truth telling is the beginning of repentance. And repentance is necessary because the illusion of 'safety' that I had was not neutral either. It was based on someone else's not having that safety, and that inequality is as sinful as any other sin. But in relation to this conversation, it matters to acknowledge that we begin from different places in our experience of whether God's power might be necessary, when many of us (like me) may have been able to live with the functional atheism of not really feeling like we needed to trouble God at all, thankyou very much.

Others may never have had this luxury, the illusion of protection and safety in the world's present. Preaching and preaching the stories of scripture can help us here: it will be evident as we look at the reversals that come to whole peoples and the evident surprise as inequality and sinful society leads to downfall, that the world did not become precarious suddenly when middle class white Americans and British folks felt the pinch of a cost of living crisis or lockdown. We can trace the stories of repentance and reconciliation through our scripture in preaching, as a template for our own. And, here if we have the wisdom to put in the foreground some of the lessons offered by the Body of Christ who have lived with the reality of persecution, poverty, and fellowship as resistance to these, we have a future. But there is a work of repentance still to do, beginning even with the recognition that 'precarity' is nothing new for much of our world.

Wesleyan Possibilities

Writing in the Preface to the 1746 collection '*Sermons on several occasions*,' John Wesley referenced cultural and linguistic divisions between his reader, whom he flattered to assume was a learned person accustomed to 'elaborate, elegant' rhetoric, and what he called 'the bulk of mankind.'[7] These were the 'plain people' lacking either ability or desire to code shift between street, mine, or factory and the language of the Book of Common Prayer, let alone the rhetoric of the pulpit shaped by Oxford tutorial and High Table. In slightly defensive posture, Wesley referenced a mutual incomprehension between pulpit and street not dissimilar to the motif 'Ok, Boomer' to justify what he claimed was a 'plain truth for plain people' rhetorical style in his written sermons. This was a familiar, not unaffected posture for Wesley, reminiscent of his condescension to 'be more vile' and adopt field preaching.

Wesley's removal of the sermon from the liturgy, and the popularity of field preaching in the 18th century, foreshadow a present renewal in aural culture brought by the blog and podcast, alongside shared video and other social media. These are now extraordinarily influential mood and identity shaping vehicles. For those born after 2000 in the developed west, they are dominant among the tools with which

[6] Ibid, pp. 49-51.

[7] John Wesley, '*Sermons on Several Occasions*,' (London: The Epworth Press, 1944), p. v.

people practice self and community.[8] In this new digitally dominated culture, the sermon may paradoxically not have lost authority as a way of offering an encounter with the living Triune God. And even if it is admittedly the 'vinyl' of the information culture, the IRL sermon may yet be a bridge back to the practice of common worship and even liturgy, as digital community continues to change and develop.

Almost as an aside Wesley recognised the competent authority of his 'plain' reader to understand the world around her and the barriers to 'present and future happiness,' be they personal or political.[9] She was not simply thick or disinterested, but she lived in a different linguistic and cultural reality with its own internal moral codes, oral motifs, and ways of establishing and practicing identity. Wesley proposed to offer if not mutual comprehension between this and his own linguistic world, at least a field guide to the learned truths of the Christian Gospel adapted for 'plain' ears. Whether he did or not is a different question: no one would have accused him of rhetorical humility or a lack of confidence in the superiority of his own culture within the 18th century English world. That he noticed he needed to, and that this was a more subtle project than simply complaining about the selfishness, greed, and general blindness of the next generation, is a worthwhile example. If there is a DNA to Methodist preaching, somewhere in the double helix of grace, wonder, warning, justice, and service is a respect for the agency of the hearer.

The fact that we have abused privileged status in preaching is no excuse to go silent now. And there is hope for our practice of preaching if we can recover a sense that each person does have authority and capacity to judge and choose for 'present and future happiness,' and not just for themselves, but for our patterns of consumption and political power. Wesley believed people were not stupid. Part of why they listened was because of the sermon he lived with his life: he worked to alleviate the causes and effects of poverty and diminished living, and Methodists have always treated the work of piety as full partners with the work of mercy. This means building sustainable models of education, health care, food, shelter, community, legal reform to allow predictable economy, freedom from enslavement have always been part of the where, what, how of Wesleyan preaching.

In many ways, I think the present social justice and advocacy work of many Wesleyan communities (the 'work of mercy') have replaced the liturgy as the setting for the sermon. I think this is a heritage dating from, at its best, Wesley's field preaching. Removing the sermon from the liturgy is to denude it of the scripture and the community, making it far more likely to elevate the personality of the preacher as the focus of people's wonder and acclamation. One of the liabilities of the traditional pulpit and sermon is to exercise an exclusive power for the 'expert' or the appointed to mediate scripture. But locating the sermon again in the context of community may offer a corrective to this: so a podcast might intentionally use the popularity of a particular preacher, but set that in community modelling kingdom action. If we took seriously the 'work of mercy' (including how we vote, keep and spend money, and order households) as the liturgical context of the sermon as podcast, we might acknowledge new spaces for Wesleyan field 'preaching' in the digital world and community, well beyond those that are in formal terms religious. And we might recover the interest and sense of usefulness of actual IRL liturgy, as a practice to rehearse self and community as part of the work of God. The longing for meaning, and desire to be part of serving community is widely present across the digital world,

[8] Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, Woodhead, p. 1.
[9] Wesley, p.v.

which should be good news for those of us trying to offer Christian life in response to that longing.

Digital Space, control, and preaching

Consider what aspirations drive the thousands seeking community with a man who, accompanied by 3.56 million subscribers, 'sits with dogs', models gentle yet directive attention, and works for their rehoming on youtube?[10] Consider what frustration with the seemingly intractable cruelty our day to day economy helps to make the largest YouTube channel (301 million subscribers and billions of views) 'Mr Beast,' populated with his extravagant gestures of restitution or recovery?[11] Much as I want to criticise the less than reflective, self oriented focus of the offer Mr Beast makes, I wonder if he is so successful because he offers a vehicle for the collective longing for meaning, and the desire for active prophetic restitution. He offers participation, in a simple world where massive resources are the only obstacle to abundant life, without the inconvenience of having to take action oneself. Listening to his sermons, I hear 'you don't have to feel bad about how much you consume as long as you make sure everyone else can consume the same way,' and 'the only thing wrong in any situation is that there is not enough money or resources.' Of course, it is less 'God is in control,' and more 'you are in control' or 'Mr Beast is in control'; the culture of 'manifesting' and 'appreciating' blessing replaces a culture of prayer to God, in community, and thanksgiving.

It is just that actual sermons have not kept pace with our burgeoning digital world, on the whole. A genuine question is whether the digital space itself can allow preaching or offer liturgy: can Christian faith and discipleship be removed from the IRL experience? You cannot wash feet over zoom, but there are other things you can do, clearly. Small may be beautiful and we may iterate in thousands of small digital communities an experience of participating in God's life in the world. I would argue that these massive digital culture engines are the location where most people today answer the longing for participation in what feels like and is presented as transformative justice. It is not. But their success testifies to me of the durability of the longing. Here we would do well to remember Wesley's preface to the sermons: the 'plain reader' has as much capacity to judge what will make for 'present and future happiness' as anyone else, and indeed may have skills, language, and morality for navigating the online world that are not available to others. Certainly as recent studies have shown, there is not just hope, but great skill in negotiating identity formation and working together to solve the grave problems of the world among those we would hope to engage in preaching, already.[12] What there is less of is a sense of institutions offering the roadmap for this work, or a sense of trust in their integrity should they be.

How can we preach in this space, and what is our liturgy, to try not to mimic icons of worldly power but to embody the 'control' that God does exercise in God's providence? The preacher does exercise power: she interprets events, has

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[10] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I5Dz5d4mmdU Viewed 14 July, 2024. Rocky Kanaka 'sits with dogs,' in his local shelter, and works for their re-homing.

[11] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KkCXLABwHP0 viewed 14 July 2024: Mr Beast is an interesting example, as his main content is often morality plays worked out in the 'real lives' of his fellow youtube content creators. His content (usually 10-12 minute videos) allows the viewer to enter into the experience of the moral choices, but also creates the moral failures or successes of the participants into a voyeuristic entertainment.

[12] Katz, Ogilvie, Shaw, Woodhead, '*Gen Z Explained'*, Conclusion.

responsibility to allow the community to understand the world as God sees it, and to give a direction around which action can coalesce. In Wesleyan tradition we can enter the space and must, and we should with wisdom and humility, and wise translators and guides.

If to worship is to eavesdrop on a conversation between God and many different people and communities, across time and place, this can also be represented in a digital world. This is a conversation about what is happening and what will, and how we will be in the times that come, whether it happens across pews or in the comments of a YouTube feed. So worship is eavesdropping not only on the shouts of joy and cries of pain, but on the anger, the negotiation, the puzzling out and the daily work of food and body and care, and preaching can be about imagining a new future. In this context, a sermon (even an imperfect pulpit sermon) may be a moment of eschatological hope, a moment of past, present, and future grace held together in community, then handed back to the congregation. We must be ready to take power in the responsibility exercised to use every platform we have, but then to give that power back to the people. Sermons finish, even the longest and the most dull of them. Yet it seems to me we still have work to do, and we are equipped for the work if not for perfection in the task, certainly for the next step.[13]

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[13] image is of John Wesley's Pulpit, Wesley's Chapel and Leysian Mission, London, United Kingdom.

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