

Boldness: Speaking up for justice

Despite being considered the favourite, Lewis Hamilton didn't win his fifth Formula 1 title this season, beaten into second place by Sebastian Vettel. But, why am I telling you this, because I absolutely hate F1 with a passion. The noise, the smell, the sheer number of laps. Why would anyone find that exciting?

But, this week, I found myself liking Lewis Hamilton, and for an entirely different reason to what you might be expecting. On the radio on Monday, I learned that, on the 4th of July, Hamilton had taken part in a brand-new Formula 1 podcast, called '*Beyond the Grid*' where he'd spoken boldly about his faith. And he said this about prayer:

"When it comes to prayer, people have to make time because it can result in powerful transformations.

"You have to make time for things and every morning I have breakfast and before I eat, I pray. Every time I eat, actually, I pray. So, whether it's a couple of seconds, a minute or whatever you are praying for, take that moment.

"On Sundays, I wake up, get to church and then I have meetings afterwards. I go with a couple of my close friends, we meet, we go for breakfast and then we go to church together. We leave most often feeling enlightened and empowered, it's like a re-centering. Sometimes you leave, and you are like '*I didn't get that today,*' but most of the time you leave and you are like '*Wow, I know where I am going,*'" he explained.

When I heard this, I thought 'Wow!' Here's Lewis Hamilton, a huge role model for young people, on the eve of signing a 160 million-dollar extension contract with Mercedes, and what does he choose to talk about? His faith.

All of us are called to be bold. That great children's worship song, so simple but so true with its lyrics –

*Be bold, be strong, for the Lord your God is with you x3.
I am not afraid, I am not dismayed.
For I'm walking in faith and victory,
come on and walk in faith and victory,
for the Lord your God is with you.*

And you get a sense that Hamilton *knows* that truth, a truth that enables him to speak out with such boldness.

But, as Christians, we're called to do more than just speak about our faith. Over the last few weeks, as we've worked through the diocesan Way of Life material, we've thought about how we use the gifts and abilities God gives us. We've considered what it means to be holy as Jesus was holy; we've reflected on using story to witness to others about Jesus; and last week, in the re-telling of the story of the Good Samaritan, the challenge was how our acts of kindness can make the world a little brighter and share God's love.

We're called to do *all* these things, but we're also called to be bold in speaking up for justice. Remember that question in the 'Commission' that comes at the end of adult baptism and confirmation services that asks:

'Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?' And the response. *'With the help of God, we will.'*

Why is this there?

It's there because it was fundamental to the person of Jesus Christ, who we're called to follow and to become more like. We have the prophecy in Isaiah 61 of one coming who would *'proclaim good news to the poor, bind up the broken-hearted, proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners.'* This was the passage that Jesus turned to, recorded in our gospel reading today.

Jesus had returned to Galilee, from his time in the desert being tempted by the devil, full of the power of the Spirit, and news of him had spread quickly through the whole countryside. He taught in their synagogues, we read, and everyone praised him. What a wonderful teacher he must have been.

And then he comes to Nazareth, where he was brought up. And things don't go so well. People were struggling to reconcile what they'd heard about Jesus, from the boy they knew to be Joseph and Mary's son. You can imagine the looks and whispers of *'Well, who does he think he is?'* And this becomes even more of a problem when, standing in the synagogue, he gets up to read, unrolls the scroll and finds his place. And he reads:

The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me

to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'

Words they knew well. Words that pointed to the coming of the Messiah, a saviour - not just of the Jewish people but of the whole world.

He rolls up the scroll, sits back and says, *'Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'* In other words, *'I am he. The one you've been waiting for. And this is what I'm here to do – to fulfil the Old Testament scriptures concerning me, but also, so much more.'*

We see this three chapters later when John the Baptist, languishing in prison, sends his disciples to Jesus to ask *'Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?'* And Jesus tells them to go back and report to John what they have seen and heard. And it's this: *'The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.'* John, knowing the Isaiah prophecy, would have known exactly what Jesus meant.

Who was Jesus most concerned with during his three years of ministry on earth? The poor. Those on the fringe of society, those who were oppressed, those who had no power or influence to change the society in which they lived. A society that was unfair, that favoured the rich and impoverished entire classes of people.

But, in Luke 14, Jesus says *'When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.'*

To the rich young man in Mark 10, he says *'Go, sell everything you have and give it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.'*

During his sermon on the mount, looking at his disciples, he says, *'Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you will laugh.'* Why did he say this looking at his disciples? Because he wanted *them* to understand what was most important to him, and thus would should be most important to them too, and to us.

And in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats in Matthew 25, Jesus says that those who enter the kingdom will be those whose faith in action transformed the lives of the poor: *'For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was ill and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.'*

'When did we do these things for you?' the righteous will ask. And the King will reply, *'Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.'*

And that is what we are called to do. To be bold like Jesus was bold. And to speak up for justice as Jesus spoke up for justice. To speak up for those who have no voice. The weak, the dispossessed, the hungry, the homeless, those imprisoned in so many ways. And, from our reading from Ephesians, we can trust that we'll be well equipped for the task. For, it's in God's mighty power that we stand. And through his Spirit that we're given the words to say.

With our calling in mind, questions we can ask of ourselves:

- How *can* we make a difference in the world today?
- What current events/situations are on our minds/hearts?
- To what extent do we as Christians, as a church, engage explicitly with politics, economics, peace and justice in the world? Do they feature openly in our prayers? And do they feature in our actions?

Desmond Tutu famously said, *'I am puzzled by which Bible people are reading when they suggest that religion and politics don't mix.'*

- Are there issues of peace and justice that you feel particularly passionate about? And, if so, how might you get involved? How might *you* make a difference, however small?

And so, we end with the words of the Commission:

'Will you acknowledge Christ's authority over human society, by prayer for the world and its leaders, by defending the weak, and by seeking peace and justice?' And the response. *'With the help of God, we will.'*

I now invite you to sit and reflect on the words of a song by Tim Hughes called *'God of Justice'*. Listen carefully to the words and how you might respond.