

Finding the Way of Christ in Community

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer.

Lectionary Readings: Psalm 19; Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21;

This week we have a treasury of beautiful lectionary readings. I hope you won't mind that I've noted something from them all!

This is the 3rd Sunday of Epiphany. The lectionary Psalm 19, a favourite for the music of Bach, Beethoven, & Handel is considered to be the greatest poem in the Psalter and one of the greatest lyrics in the world¹ by CS Lewis. After the opening salvo of the heavens proclaiming the glory of God, Eugene Peterson translates from verses 7 & 8, that

- The revelation of God is whole and pulls our lives together.
- The signposts of God are clear and point out the right road.
- The life-maps of God are right, showing the way to joy.
- The directions of God are plain and easy on the eyes.

Well, Earth to heaven, we have a message for you. Things are a bit murky down here. How about shining some of that light a bit brighter. Life is messy. Being church is messy.

This week, comments were coming in from all over the world following the decision of the Anglican Primates, (the senior bishops from the 38 Anglican Provinces) to censure the episcopal church in the USA for three years over their support of same sex marriage. Addendum A, couched in words of love pronounced the edict. The Anglican community, united in division, was full of comments from many sides. Though many noted that there was no language of repentance.

I am reminded of the Wizard's advice to Frodo in Lord of the Ring's, The Fellowship of the ring, **"We cannot choose the time we live in. We can only choose what we do with the time we are given."**

Living in community. We can either be split by our differences or we can celebrate the differences together. The Primates agreed on Addendum B the mission of the Church of Jesus Christ here in the 21st century, **'To proclaim the transforming love of God in the power of the Spirit throughout the world, inviting all to embrace the beauty and joy of the Gospel.'**

In Luke's Gospel, we see a different kind of proclamation. Jesus goes to the temple, freshly charged by the Holy Spirit after 40 days and nights in the desert. He has overcome the temptation to conform to the powers of this world. This man, God in the flesh, though fully human, a carpenter by trade, has spent time alone with God, the Father. **Jesus knows exactly why he is there, in that time, in that place.**

Imagine the atmosphere, seeing this man that many knew as the son of Joseph, proclaiming these words of the prophet Isaiah from chapters 58 and 61.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, Because He Anointed Me to Preach the Gospel to the Poor. He has sent Me to Proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden to Proclaim the favourable Year of the Lord.

This mission proclaimed, and prophecy fulfilled, provided the road map which Jesus followed to the cross. Compare these words, a proclamation for social and political action, with those of the Anglican Primates.

You see the community in the temple had become so legalistic in the detail of sacrifices and rituals that they had left behind the heartfelt meaning behind the faith they were charged to uphold. I call this the **see no evil, hear no evil** mentality. Being legalistic gave them an excuse not to look beyond the sacraments to see the truth of the sorrow and pain in the world around them in a society where those who suffered most were least likely to be heard. This freedom proclaimed by Jesus, was manna from heaven. Water to a thirsty soul. The crowds of Galilee followed him wherever he went. He preached a change of heart that turned faith into action. He was chased out of the temple that day. No-one was buying the message proclaimed that day by a local lad.

Paul writes to the Christian community of Corinth, a fiercely competitive commercial centre where material gain was the one true god. It is important to Paul that the Corinthians should stand out from the world around them and behave differently, both in community and in the world at large. We see them today discussing the hierarchy of gifts. They can't take off the cloth of the society around them such is their jockeying for power and favour. Paul takes great care to explain to them that every gift is needed. None can stand alone. Together, in their diversity, each one is a part of the body of Christ who is the head. Connected. Beautiful. A new creation.

The latest statistics of the Church of England show weekly attendance over the last year falling below a million for the first time. Yet we live in a world that is crying out for spiritual renewal in the western world. There have never been so many charitable bodies doing good works in the world. There are 180,000 charities registered in England and Wales alone. And western governments provide infrastructure, good government and security that support industry and allow people to thrive locally in community. Still people feel sidelined. This is evidenced by Jeremy Corbyn coming in on a socialist ticket to disrupt the standard platforms of the Labour party giving power to voices which had previously felt irrelevant. Disruptive voices can be heard currently in America in the Republican race. We look on with horror at the slander of whole ethnic groups and yet we are told swathes of the evangelic right are listening, taking notice and coming on board so disenchanted they have become with establishment politics. Has the church fallen into the same camp?

What is the truth? How are we called to be real, authentic Christians in community here and now in the 21st century?

The Temple tradition was to hear the word, then discuss it, then worship. It's a tradition followed in Luke's reading. It's a tradition followed in Nehemiah, the Old Testament reading for today. There the people stood for six hours listening to the reading of the word. It is said that some churches have stopped all together the reading of the word. If the natural world declares the splendour of God, the Bible helps us to find our way in the world in which we live.

But there's one other component that will help us. The desert Fathers employed it and Jesus used it liberally during his ministry. Prayer. Meditation. Time alone with God. We are one body in Christ. **Without prayer, there is no revelation. Without revelation, the people perish.**

May the Spirit guide us through the word and prayer together in community. In the name of Christ, Amen.

Pamela Hull, 24 January 2016, St. Andrew's Coniston