

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost – 2018

James 5:12-20 Mark 9:39-50

It has been a fascinating liturgical week. On Tuesday the Church celebrated the life of St Sergius of Moscow one of the patron saints of Russia, on Wednesday the feast of Lancelot Andrewes, 17th century Bishop of Winchester and on Thursday we marked the life and times of St Vincent de Paul, French priest and founder of Vinnies who died in 1660. We rounded off the week with Michaelmas the feast of St Michael and all Angels. I felt indeed like I was surrounded by that great cloud of witnesses from the Letter to the Hebrews in all their diversity. When I reflected on each of them I was struck by both their individuality but also their marked lack of individualism, and I realised that the lections for both last Sunday and this are about Jesus' teaching on community, *in my name*.

Three times in the gospel passage from this Sunday and last Jesus speaks about acts done 'in his name.' Last Sunday welcoming a child *in his name*, this week he speaks about deeds of power done *in his name* and the gift of simple hospitality to those who *bear the name* of Christ. The gentle care of the vulnerable, the powerful driving out of evil and the offering of hospitality three fundamentals of Christian ministry which have been lived out by the saints we have celebrated this past week. Serguis the monk and abbot and his care for those in his community and for travellers through the wilderness in which his community lived, St Vincent de Paul and his ministry to the vulnerable and St Michael who fought and defeated the dragon. Not to forget Lancelot Andrewes who, although not canonised, remains an important figure for those who hold to a classical Anglican position on sacramentality and prayer. Like them, we too are called to act in his name, in every aspect of our lives in vulnerability, in power or simple hospitality. This binds us together and reminds us that we cannot act alone because we are one; our faith is a communal one, one in which we all have a role. This is what makes us the Church, the Communion of Saints.

Jesus says some extraordinary things in today's passage. Cutting off hands and feet, plucking out eyes! It is Jesus at his rhetorical best, it is harsh. But what he is emphasising is the importance of community epitomised by the Kingdom of God. Do not let anything get in your way of communion, cut away anything, anything that prevents you from being one.

James as we have discovered over these past weeks demonstrates to us the practical outworking of this communal faith, he ends his letter with teaching on prayer and praise, but importantly communal prayer and praise. It lies at the very heart of our faith and practise because it something to which we are all called. When we read the stories of the saints we may feel ill equipped physically, intellectually or spiritually. We are not all called to the seemingly heroic deeds of St Vincent de Paul, St

Sergius or whoever, but we are all called to prayer. It is prayer that truly binds us together, prayer is universal to the Christian faith in all its traditions, prayer in the Christian tradition is offered in the name of Jesus and in this way our denominational differences fall away, those we are tempted to think of as being not one of us are indeed with us - *in his name*.

There are challenges with this text as there are with all those concerning healing. Jesus like James doesn't separate healing and sin. 'Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.' But what this does, this idea of healing *and* repentance, is remind us that we are all in need of healing. What tends to happen is there is a divide between the needy sick and the noble carer. It is an artificial divide there is no 'us and them' we are all in need of each other's prayer and in praying for each other, together, there is healing.

In today's gospel John wants Jesus to stop someone from healing because he is not of their tribe! ' But Jesus said, 'Don't stop him; for no one who does a deed of power *in my name* will be able soon afterwards to speak evil of me. Whoever is not against us is for us.' We can see in these acts done *in my name* the beginning of the idea of sacrament – the Church's sacramental acts of healing, forgiveness, initiation, care point beyond themselves to something greater – to God in Christ, *in my name*. The sacraments are in themselves builders of community. They bind us together in many ways. Our particularly Anglican view of the sacraments with its refusal to separate God's action and our response, espoused by folk like Lancelot Andrewes, is also important in understanding community. Sacraments are not magic, they require a response from us and we do that in communion, we do it together...in his name.

Jesus calls us to lay aside the individualism that mars our society and church and calls us to profound communion. The communion of Saints no less! It is in this way that we will truly begin to understand the working of God in our lives and in the lives of others - both our contemporaries and those who have gone before us. And it is in this way that we glimpse the Kingdom of God. Francis Thompson wrote a poem called The Kingdom of God in which he described its nearness to us if we would but open our eyes. Yesterday we celebrated the Feast of Michaelmas – Michael and all Angels and I was reminded of a stanza of the poem which I think sums things up and warns against turning away from each other:

The angels keep their ancient places;
 Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces
 That miss the many-splendoured thing... Amen.