

Third Sunday after Pentecost 2020

This weekend has seen a lifting in some of the restrictions that we currently live under. From next Sunday we will be able to gather in larger numbers, albeit under certain conditions. Over these past months and weeks we have been restricted to mixing within our households or family groups, slowly we are beginning to gather again and to mix with others. It is a reminder to us that just as we have important roles and responsibilities as members of families, they are now to be mirrored in the way we deal with each other outside our family and friendship groups. In our day this mixing brings with it heightened responsibilities, we have been mindful of the care of family and members of our household now we are being asked to mirror that care to others, we are being asked to be much more aware of each other and each other's well-being.

This is indeed the message of Jesus in our gospel today. Jesus is at his rhetorical best; he is speaking into a culture in which familial ties, tribal allegiances and hierarchies are sacrosanct. He is speaking in a time when your place within your family, your village or tribe, within synagogue or society, those to whom you owed allegiance was clearly defined. Jesus calls upon his hearers to see these relationships anew, to rethink allegiances and he knows it will be divisive. His is a message that cuts across the cultural norms of his day.

St Paul knows only too well the question of division within the community. In many of his letters we hear his response to very particular circumstances. But what he does in Romans is speak to Christian ethic more generally. What we have just heard is beginning of a long passage in which Paul addresses Christian behaviour and in particular the question of our unity in Christ. It is this unity which lies at the heart of our ethic and way of being together, this applies to us today, all of us.

The pandemic which has affected us all cannot be defeated by law. All the rules in the world will not prevent its spread. But that doesn't mean that we are free to do as we please. Paul says much the same. You are free from the straightjacket of the Jewish law... you are now bound in love to one another in a common baptism, in the Spirit. We are the same, it is only the love and care we have for one another that will keep us safe, here as we gather and in our lives in the wider community. We are to be together with each other in such a way that none of us need to be fearful.

At the beginning of this Church year we were introduced once again to Matthew's gospel. We were reminded of this group of people who were trying to rediscover themselves in the light of the life of Jesus and the profound changes that were happening in their Jewish faith primarily the destruction of the Temple by the Romans. Matthew is indeed, as one scholar called his thesis, 'A gospel for a new people.' This was a people trying to rediscover their identity and their relationships, renew their culture and their faith. They asked

the question how we might understand our history and our background in the light of Jesus.

In the midst of our concerns about the Pandemic we have been confronted with another issue - that of identity, race and culture. The Black Lives Matter movement has quite rightly brought to the fore the issues around the way that people of colour are treated. BLM was born out of the US Civil Rights movement which in turn finds its roots in the striving to abolish slavery. It is an issue that lies at the very foundation of the establishment of the United States that we know today. It is an extraordinary history and the characters that make up that history are woven into the very fabric of that nation. The question that has been asked is how do we deal with that history?

This matter of how to deal with history has become a matter of contention in our time in our own nation as it was in time that Matthew's gospel was written. Matthew, like Paul, didn't do away with the history of the Jewish people but asked them to see it anew, to look at the characters of the Jewish faith in new ways. Look at the Genealogy of Jesus in Matthew's gospel from Abraham to Jesus. A roll call of humanity - with all its contradictions, mixed motives, the noble and the frail, the good and the not so good all now to be seen in the unifying figure of Christ, in whose spirit we are now unified

Rowan Williams wrote a little book called 'Why Study the Past' in it he wrote: "If we dismiss the past as unintelligible, if we read its texts as closed off from us by their alien setting, we refuse to see how we have ourselves been formed in history; we pretend that history has not yet begun.we must choose to relate to the past *somehow*. The question is not whether to do this, but how to do it well."

Matthew and Paul wanted to do it well. To look at the past and see Christ fulfilling all that had gone before. What we are called to do as Christians is to look back at our tradition, see it anew in the light of the Spirit and move together into the future. Just as the Paul and the evangelists looked to their history and their traditions and built upon them we too are called to do the same. There will be division from time to time, Jesus promises us no less! But the question will be, do we will deal with those divisions well. Do we disregard each other as having nothing to offer, do we disregard the past as having nothing to teach us? The movements of today as they have been in the past and as they will be in the future are calls to repentance, to see things anew, to move on together into the future prepared by God for all of us. The question is not whether we do this, but how we do it well. History it is said is written by the victors, Christ challenges that assumption, our history needs to be written and read with humility. The cross that Christ asks us to share is in part the weight of history, I pray we bear it with humility and find in it the fulfillment of all that had gone before. Amen.