

Third Sunday after Epiphany 2020

Isaiah 9:1-4, 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Matthew 4:12-25.

Those of you that are keen adherents of the Book of Common Prayer would know that it ends with the Articles of Religion and the Table of Affinity, two quite fascinating documents. But before that the Prayer Book proper concludes with the Accession Service. It is isn't really a service but a selection of suitable prayers, recommended readings, anthems, litanies for use, and I quote... 'in all churches and chapels within this realm, every year, upon the anniversary of the day of the Accession of the Reigning Sovereign.' It also includes a collect, epistle and gospel for a celebration of Communion and a beautiful prayer for unity, a prayer which is a treasure of Anglican liturgy. This prayer in a contemporary form has survived in our current Prayer Book.

Let us pray: God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,
our only Saviour, the Prince of Peace:
give us grace seriously to lay to heart
the great danger we are in by our divisions.
Take away all prejudice and pride,
and whatever else may hinder true harmony,
for there is only one Lord, one faith, one baptism,
one God and Father of us all.
Grant that we may glorify your name together
that the world may believe in you. Amen.

This prayer stands out because of its strong language: give us grace *seriously* to lay to heart the great *danger* we are in by our divisions. It is in this vein that Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth. He uses language which carries with it some force: 'Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters...' The matter of unity is central, it was in New Testament times and remains so today, indeed the imperative is perhaps even greater today as the Church engages with culture in all its manifestations. The question is, as it always has been, the matter of theology *and* culture. Multi culturalism is evident everywhere, particularly in this country; at its best it is a wonderful thing and it is reflected in Church life and practise. But Church is different and this is why St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians and Cranmer writing our Prayer Book can use such definite language. We are bound together, we are one, unity is not something that we seek, it is a reality that we should be seeking to express. When we don't there is danger; there is very good reason that John in the fourth gospel places on the lips of Jesus those words in the high priestly prayer for the unity of his followers. *That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.* Our lack of visible unity presents us with a credibility issue! We are not living what we claim to be. One of the problems is our inability, it seems, to do what might be best described as joined-up theology.

In today's gospel passage Jesus leaves home and heads north further into the territory of Galilee of the Gentiles. These are folk from time before the time of Isaiah have been ostracised because they have mixed with folk from outside. They are a mixed bunch, a multi-cultural mob, they are living in a marginal seat. It is for a good reason that Jesus heads in this direction, because this the last place that we would expect to find the messiah! Jesus settles in Capernaum and begins his teaching ministry; his message...? I want you to start seeing things differently, a new light has shone. He wanders along the shore of Sea of Galilee and calls these unlikely men to follow him. There are no prerequisites, he doesn't question them about their faith, their morals or ethics or lack of them. His call is to relationship and that is pure gift. This is important, Jesus' call is unconditional, gratuitous gift.

Of course like us they don't get it. They would much prefer to do things to try and make this new gathering a particular shape, they don't really want children hanging around, and there are certain other types such as Samaritans and Syro-Phoenicians that they'd rather not hang out with and all manner of others. What they don't understand is what we too struggle to get. What we do is get things the wrong way round, it's very human. There is a sense in which we believe we are building a community; I do it all the time, my colleagues do it too! It says that unity is something to be achieved to be won, whereas unity, and from there community is something to know as a gift. The theologian Richard Niebuhr once wrote 'the fundamental decision of the Church is not to be Church, but to let God be its God.' The Church is not a political party, or a club of like-minded folk, if we understand the Church in this way we have missed its supernatural nature. This is joined-up theology not the disjointed stuff that seems to find its way into the life of the Church and which is much more interesting to the media.

We are entering into a year that will require of us a great deal of listening as the General Synod meets. We will hear much from the different wings of the Church. We will hear from more 'progressive' types those with a keen sense of the movement of culture in our world, some of whom say that those who dissent from the new consensus are not worth listening to. The 'traditionalist' does just the same, claiming that the giftedness of being part of the Body is somehow not real in those in those wanting to engage with the culture around them. We must all recall the calling of Jesus that we share, and do the hard work of joined-up theology which asks the questions of God's grace and salvation as divine gift. Not to do this work is to place us in great danger.

We will continue to build this community of faith (despite what I've just said), but we must remember that it is not our doing but a movement of God, who in Christ says come follow me. I hope that we will be both surprised and delighted and not too concerned about what the net gathers up. Amen.