

Abounding in thanksgiving

St Philip's Anglican Church, O'Connor

Seventh Sunday after Pentecost 24 — Year C — July 2022

Revd Martin Johnson

Genesis 18:20-32, Psalm 138 Colossians 2:6-15, Luke 11:1-13

In Psalm 138 we recited: I will bow down toward your holy temple and give thanks to your name: because of your faithfulness and your loving-kindness: the attitude and motivation for our lives of prayer.

'Johnson consistently sets himself a low bar and fails to meet it.' 'Needs to read the question more closely.' 'Johnson, could do better.' Comments from some of my school reports I discovered as we cleared my parents' house. I don't recall this having much of an impact on my performance! But I do recall dreading being told 'You ought to be ashamed of yourself!' That was guaranteed to make me sit up. Shame it seems is a great motivator, but I wonder if it has a place in lives of faith? As we endure the climate wars, the culture wars, the gender wars, the race wars, the weapon of choice it seems, is shame. Shaming is one way of changing behaviour, bringing folk around to your way of thinking. Increasingly many are quick to heap shame on those they disagree with. Jesus too found himself in such a position at a time of religious, political, cultural, and social turmoil; shame was a part of his culture, and as we struggle with the issues of our day, his response is instructive.

Last week we read of Jesus visiting the house of Mary and Martha. We watch unfold a classic near east, first century, scenario; hospitality is being offered, that crucial part of cultural and social life, perhaps the greatest good. Jesus is often a recipient of hospitality and in receiving it he reveals what it truly is. Jesus the guest becomes Jesus the host he reveals true hospitality, the hospitality of God. The act of hospitality becomes a prayer because of the way it is offered. This is not easy of course, as Martha knew, sometimes there is much to do, it is not easy to be prayerful when a guest has arrived unexpectedly and there is bread to be baked and a meal to be prepared. Jesus in today's parable about the unexpected guest helps us to understand the Martha, Mary problem.

This is not an easy piece of scripture to understand in English, let alone in Greek, overlaid as it is with the cultural and social norms of first century Palestine. But part of the story is the worry that the sleeping man in the parable will be shamed if he doesn't get out of bed and get his friend something to eat! When Jesus speaks about hospitality: inviting those who can't repay you, eating alongside the unworthy and the marginalised, making sure you know your place at table, the question of shame seems to loom large. In Mary's case I wonder if perhaps she is concerned about what others might think about her hospitality. It seems in her concern about the shame of not being a good host, she misses the real needs of her guest, hearing what her guest has to offer, which as Jesus reminds her is the better part. Hospitality is simply loving attentiveness one to another, this is our calling, persevering in attentiveness this is our call, this is Jesus' response and must be ours too.

Our first reading this morning is a classic piece of Old Testament. God has heard reports that Sodom and Gomorrah have been extremely wicked, some say it's because of their lack of hospitality. Anyway, I think God must have been listening in to the intercessions at the local Anglican Parish—getting the news! (That doesn't happen here of course!) Anyway, it seems that the news is indeed true, he makes plans to do away with the folk from Sodom and Gomorrah and is convinced to change his mind by that good Anglican, Abraham! Does it seem that way to you? After all isn't that what prayer is all about!?! If we badger God long

enough, keep knocking and banging on, God will eventually, simply because of our perseverance, do what we want! Perhaps we think we can shame God! I think that Jesus is saying something completely different!

What God, in Christ, is drawing us into is perseverance in quite a different way, perseverance in understanding the mind, the hospitality of God. Abraham is not changing God's mind, he is being drawn into the justice of God, bit by bit. As Abraham perseveres, so he is opened up into the divine life. This is the better part, loving attentiveness to God and to each other. No grand gesture but being slowly changed. As Paul told the Colossians you are being drawn into the life of Christ who is the hospitality of God, not shamed, in fact Paul suggests that it is the rulers have been shamed through the power of the cross.

In Matthew's introduction to the Lord's Prayer, he has Jesus saying: 'And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.' Our repetitions are not for God, they are for us. When we pray the Lord's Prayer, when we pray the Eucharist, we persevere in praying aright, not that God might hear, but that *we might hear*. Our keeping on coming here is not simply an expression of our perseverance our doggedness, certainly not a sign of our shame, but is a sign that God perseveres with us. Coming here is not simply our loving attentiveness to God, but because of our faith in, and thankfulness for, God's attentiveness to us.

For me and I hope for this community this is what the catholic faith is all about, it is about living a life abounding in thanksgiving, as Paul would have it, because of God's attentiveness. What Paul is saying here and in Ephesians and other places is that God wants to enlighten us that we might see how much God loves us and has a purpose for each and every one of us in bringing about the reign of heaven on earth: your kingdom come! Everything that we do has this as its focus, making the kingdom a reality. So everything we do, even the smallest act of attentiveness, has significance. We can tend to feel discouraged, ashamed even, that our part in all this doesn't feel very big. I feel like an extra sometimes in a vast operatic production, but this is what the catholic faith is about, the Communion of Saints, each with a part!

We are all too easily distracted by the culture and politics around us. We can too easily be drawn into the culture of shame, our task is to rediscover our brand of counterculture, which reveals our identity and vocation—our attentiveness to God and each other. At this time of uncertainty, when we might be tempted to wonder about our future. It is time to do what we do best, play to our strengths: reinvest in the tradition and, following Jesus, challenge the dominant culture which is never as strong as it looks and feels.

Ultimately ours is a call to prayer, this is at the heart of our catholic culture, whatever we are doing, no matter how simple or ordinary, we commit ourselves to attentiveness to God and to one another and bit by bit we make it part of the liturgy of our lives, confident that God will not forsake the work of our hands. Amen.