

Sermon 12/05/24 Psalm 1, John 17:6-19

The children at St James school have been hearing about the parables in their assemblies and as part of that Myra, Richard and I have been talking to the year 1 children about the parable of the sower in our Bible Art sessions. The art work is to show the different types of land that the seed fell on. They will be on display at the back of church for the next couple of weeks. One of the boys challenged us. 'But the seed needed more than good soil to make it grow. You should've said that it needed rain'. He was right of course, the seed did need more than just good a good seed bed, and I noticed that one of his classmates had helpfully added a rainbow to her picture.

This morning's psalm is telling us that if we are well rooted, when we have rain as well as good soil, we can grow strong and firm and produce fruit when the time is right. Those roots can reach downwards into the water, our leaves will not wither. Our roots should be in our 'study' of God's law. Don't panic I don't for one minute think that God is expecting us all to develop into scholarly theologians. What God wants is for us to follow his ways rather than the ways of the world. To put ourselves in the position where our roots can reach down and take refreshment. The psalmist is also clear that we have a choice as to whether or not we follow God's ways and what will be the results of that choice – we can be like fruitful trees or like chaff that blows in the wind.

Looking at the other two readings it is the contrast that is really noticeable. The passage from Acts gives such a clear narrative of what the church did next, they needed to replace Judas on the leadership team and held an election. It is clear that Mathias who was chosen to replace Judas was deeply rooted in the group, and the process bears an uncanny resemblance to a modern day annual parish meeting. Contrast that with the complex sentiments of the gospel passage. You are not alone if you felt that it simply says the same thing over and over again. But it does justify a careful unpicking as Jesus prays for his disciples are not simply that God will look after them but are quite specific in what he is asking for.

Firstly he prays that God will protect them from the world and from the evil one. The disciples had belonged to the Father, and he had given them to his Son. But now everything is being returned to the Father and they belong it him once more. The disciples are no longer apprentices but rounded by their experiences and understanding are ready to take up the mission of the church. However because of their understanding they have become hated by the world. Jesus prays for their continued protection from the worldly forces of evil..

Secondly he prays for unity for them not only as a group but for unity with God, essential if they are to continue with the mission of the church. The Acts reading shows that they are beginning on this path, they consider what is needed, in this case to make up the number of leaders, and to act.

Then he prays that they may share his joy. Which seems odd at the point where he knows he is about to suffer a hideous death, but his joy here is that the disciples will take forward his work in promoting God's kingdom on earth. A few weeks ago I clumsily tried to explain that wearing this cassock, once owned by one of the Readers previously in the parish gave me a sense of taking up the baton, of continuity. You may have experienced that feeling in churches where worship has taken place for many centuries, or in the use of a particular traditional prayer.

Finally Jesus prays for the disciples' position in the world. Of the world but separate, representing God but still in the world.

It is hard to compare ourselves to the founders of the early church. They had experienced life in the company of Christ, they experienced the deep sorrow and fear of the crucifixion, and the uncertainty that followed. But they had been faithful in following Jesus and adopting his ways and he asks God to acknowledge and protect them. We see in Acts the beginnings of the united church, we heard in Psalm 1 the psalmist's undertaking that God will refresh those with deep roots but others may blow away in the wind.

How can we make sure we are rooted in God's ways? We will acknowledge that there are times when we will fail, our roots will come unstruck and not be able to reach the comfort we are offered. If you came to the pathways to prayer yesterday you had the opportunity to look at a wide variety of ways to deepen your own relationship with God. Both worship and reading of scripture can also broaden our knowledge. We can think carefully about our reactions to worldly matters and what our convictions really are. There are times when we will be in the world but may feel separate from it. If you didn't manage to come down yesterday do try to pop in later today or during the week - there is a wealth of ideas.

It is our own responsibility to keep our faith and our lives rooted in God's way, and to support our fellow Christians in their own faith. Where we have these roots God will protect us in the same way that he protected the first disciples as they established the church.