

Sunday 18th July – Trinity 7

Eucharist

Hymn – Praise to the Lord

1 Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation!
O my soul, praise him, for he is your health and salvation!
All you who hear; now to his temple draw near,
join in profound adoration.

2 Praise to the Lord, above all things so mightily reigning;
keeping us safe at his side and so gently sustaining!
Have you not seen all you have needed has been
met by his gracious ordaining?

3 Praise to the Lord, who will prosper our work and defend us;
surely his goodness and mercy here daily attend us.
Ponder anew what the Almighty can do,
who with his love will befriend us

4 Praise to the Lord! O let all that is in me adore him!
All that has life and breath, come now with praises before him.
Let the Amen sound from his people again;
now as we worship before him.

Collect

Holy God,
faithful and unchanging:
enlarge our minds with the knowledge of your truth,
and draw us more deeply into the mystery of your love,
that we may truly worship you,
Father, Son and Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

Jeremiah 23: 1-6

Woe to the shepherds who destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! says the Lord. Therefore, thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, concerning the shepherds who shepherd my people: It is you who have scattered my flock, and have driven them away, and you have not attended to them. So I will attend to you for your evil doings, says the Lord. Then I myself will gather the remnant of my flock out of all the lands where I have driven them, and I will bring them back to their fold, and they shall be fruitful and multiply. I will raise up shepherds over them who will shepherd them, and they shall not fear any longer, or be dismayed, nor shall any be missing, says the Lord.

The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved and Israel will live in safety. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'

Ephesians 2:11-end

So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision'—a physical circumcision made in the flesh by human hands— remember that you were at that time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, so that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it. So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near; for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father. So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

Mark 6:30-34, 53-end

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, 'Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.' For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves. Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them. As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat. When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the market-places, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.

Sermon – Rev Paul Day

(this is the sermon that is being preached at St John's and Christ the King – Theresa Jones is preaching at St James)

Sometimes we hear a passage from the Bible being read and we find it hard to grasp what's going on, what it is all about. Perhaps this is particularly true of the various letters that form part of the New Testament. Many of them were written by the apostle Paul to churches he had established or had a concern for. Others were "round-robin" letters which he hoped would be circulated to a number of churches.

They addressed all kinds of issues. Some of the issues were practical things about daily living or how the worship in churches should be conducted or relationships between individuals. Others were matters of belief as the new Christians tried to understand what the life and death and resurrection of Jesus meant for them.

As we read the letters today it can help to have some kind of knowledge about what was going on at the time, some knowledge about the context, some

knowledge about the culture and the setting. And that can be hard to find. But there are books and guides that can help us. One of my favourites is the Lion Handbook to the Bible which gives a background to all of the books of the Bible and helps us see what's going on.

Today our NT reading comes from the letter to the Ephesians. The Lion Handbook says this about the letter:

Paul's letter to the Ephesians differs considerably from his other letters. There are none of the usual personal greetings, nor does it deal with a particular problem or news. It is more of a sermon than a letter. It seems likely that it began as a 'circular' written to a group of churches in Western Turkey.

Paul had been specially commissioned to work among the Gentile (those who were not Jews), but he held no brief for a divided church. Hence his stress in this letter on God's glorious plan to bring people of every nation and background together in Christ. As Christians, all are in equal terms. All are one in Christ.

And the section we have today addresses that big issue for the early church. How does a faith – the Jewish faith - which was very much based on the uniqueness of the nation of Israel now become a faith for all. How can those who are not Jews be accepted and welcomed as equals in this new community of faith. How can there be equality when previously there had been division and exclusion.

On the surface this is not a particularly relevant issue for today. Certainly here in our churches no one argues about Jews and Gentiles and how we can worship together.

But dig a bit deeper and we can see it is just as relevant for both our churches and our wider community.

Like millions of people across the country I watched the Euro football final last Sunday evening. And like millions I was bitterly disappointed that those penalties were missed at the end. But also like millions I was proud not only at what the England team had achieved on the playing pitch, but also at the way they had conducted themselves and the way they demonstrated a commitment to social justice in all they did and said. They displayed a maturity beyond their years.

And like millions I was appalled at some of the vitriol aimed at those young players who missed the penalties, aimed at them because of their colour. This racial abuse clearly showed why the team were bold enough to “take the knee” before every game as a statement against racism, despite criticism from our national leaders.

None of us would want to see ourselves as part of the problem. We would all, I am sure, say “I’m not racist”. But perhaps what we really mean is “I am not meaning to be racist”. We make decisions and reach conclusions based on deep rooted, long held assumptions which we can find it hard to quantify.

The uncomfortable truth is that racism can easily creep in unintended and we don’t even notice it. We say that we have friends or colleagues who are black or come from other minority ethnic backgrounds. And yet deep down perhaps we are more fearful of a black man walking towards us in the street than a white man. Perhaps we unconsciously treat black people or people of colour with less respect when we come across them day by day. Maybe we are inwardly surprised when we see black people in positions of responsibility and authority.

The Church of England has been accused of such unintentional racism – it has been referred to as institutional racism. Its origins lay deep in the structures and practices of the church and, like many white people, I find it hard to notice them or identify them. The Church of England has recently published a report “from Lament to Action” looking at racism within the church and how we can learn to think and behave differently.

It tries to address these deep rooted issues. It tackles questions like why are nearly all the senior church clergy white? Why are so few lay church leaders (wardens, readers etc) from minority ethnic groups? Why can it be so hard for an ordinand from an ethnic minority background to get a position as a curate? It looks at these and more issues, because what looks like a level playing field for so many of us looks more like a steep hill to climb for others.

Another recommendation which seeks to address this hidden and unintentional bias present in us all is to encourage all church leaders – lay and ordained – to take a racism awareness course. This helps us identify the things we don’t always see – its not out to condemn us but to help us change our behaviour to be more fair.

In the gospel passage today we see Jesus looking at the crowds and having compassion on them. We know that throughout his life and ministry he was always on the look out for those on the margins, those rejected by the system, those who had little or no power. The leper, ostracised by society; the woman of ill repute, treated as garbage by those she lived amongst; the Samaritan – someone a Jew would have no contact with whatsoever. Jesus saw the value in every human being. By his actions he affirmed the words from the very start of the bible that we are, each one of us, made in God's image.

And this underpinned the way that the early church understood things. Paul – even though he came from a position of great privilege being male, a learned Jew and a Roman citizen – was able to write those words we looked at earlier in the letter to the Ephesians. In another letter – to the church in Galatia – he was able to declare that “there is no longer Jew nor Greek, no longer slave nor free, no longer male nor female – we are all one in Christ Jesus.” James, in his letter in the New Testament, urges churches to treat all people the same. For him it's the distinction being made between treatment of rich and poor – but the underlying message is the same. We are all of equal value in God's sight.

Jesus could see that the problem was not simply with the way individuals treated each other; it was not simply down to some bad apples in the crop. He could see quite clearly that the problem was woven into the way society was organised and people were viewed. The rich, the privileged, the “haves” if you like were seen as blessed by God and better than those on the edge. So many of the stories Jesus told of the upside down nature of the Kingdom of God were shining the light on this. The Kingdom where the last shall be first; the kingdom where the meek will inherit the earth, the kingdom which will belong to those persecuted for righteousness' sake.

That short passage we had today from the letter to the Ephesians finishes with Paul describing this combination of Jew and Gentile nations to be a house built on the foundation stones of the apostles – a house that becomes a dwelling place for God. In other words I think that what he is saying is that God is seen most clearly when people from different backgrounds and races come together. It is in this togetherness that God can be seen to live. Let us then do all we can – through direct and indirect actions – to help bring this about.

Hymn – Faithful shepherd feed me

1 Faithful Shepherd, feed me
in the pastures green;
faithful Shepherd, lead me
where thy steps are seen.

2 Hold me fast, and guide me
in the narrow way;
so, with thee beside me,
I shall never stray.

3 Daily bring me nearer
to the heav'nly shore;
may my faith grow clearer,
may I love thee more:

4 Hallow ev'ry pleasure,
ev'ry joy and pain;
be thyself my treasure,
though none else I gain.

5 Day by day prepare me
as thou seest best,
then let angels bear me
to thy promised rest.

Hymn – Forth in the peace of Christ we go

Forth in the peace of Christ we go;
Christ to the world with joy we bring;
Christ in our minds, Christ on our lips,
Christ in our hearts, the world's true king.

King of our hearts, Christ makes us kings;
Kingship with him his servants gain;
With Christ, the Servant-Lord of all,
Christ's world we serve to share Christ's reign.

Priests of the world, Christ sends us forth,
His world of time to consecrate,
This world of sin by grace to heal,
Christ's world in Christ to recreate.

Christ's are our lips, his word we speak;
Prophets are we whose deeds proclaim
Christ's truth in love that we may be
Christ in the world, to spread Christ's name.

We are the Church; Christ bids us show
That in his Church all nations find
Their hearth and home where Christ restores
True peace, true love, to humankind.