

15th Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 28/8/2016

Jeremiah 2:4-13
Psalm 81:10-16
Hebrews 13:1-8,15-16
Luke 14:1-14

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

One of the great gifts of our lectionary is that it naturally exposes us to a different and varied genre of scripture across the week. And so, for example, I read some of the New Testament letters, which I have to admit I often find to be turgid... with disembodied doctrine, impenetrable arguments and moralistic finger-pointing. But one of the things I have come to appreciate about them is that just a little detective work reveals fascinating stories written between the lines. Because these are letters, written to real churches about real issues. Let me explain via today's reading from Hebrews (13.1-8, 15-16) ...

We know almost nothing about the church this was written to, but we can see the issues this church community is facing.

“Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.” This is a church that's experienced vigorous persecution and some of its members are still imprisoned. But this church, presumably now in a period of safety, is forgetting their brothers and sisters left in the torture chambers!

How do we know this? Simple... because if it wasn't happening, there'd be no need for the letter to talk about it. What a disappointing church the Hebrews community must have been. Fancy doing that! Can you see how this spices up the reading? But there's more...

“... let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers” (4) Not too hard to read between the lines here!

You find a lot of moral exhortation concerning sex in Paul's letters. It looks as if when Paul first preached the gospel in setting up these new churches, he preached it as a gospel of freedom - that is, the old rules are superseded and in Jesus Christ we are free to follow the rule of love. It appears as if the new Christians took him far too literally, including in the ways of 'loving'!

So what we get in Paul's letters, written some years after his first missionary tour, is him desperately trying to douse the bushfire his preaching ignited... 'That's not what I meant at all!' So not only are the Hebrews church forgetting their colleagues in prison, but they're getting into fornication and adultery in a big way! (All of a sudden this is interesting! It's a bit like reading a Joan Collins paperback or watching 'Desperate Housewives'!)

What sort of a church are we dealing with here? A very imperfect church is what we're dealing with. The Christian Church has always been imperfect. We have a tendency to want to idealise the Early Church as somehow better than us... assuming that being closer to direct experience with Jesus would make for a more perfect expression of faith. Just remember those great stories from the Acts of the Apostles, "And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved" (Acts 2:47b) or "All who believed were together and everyone shared." (Acts 2:44). What beautiful images of community...

But reading the NT with open eyes reveals anything but perfection. We encounter a church that struggles just as much as we do in the 21st century. Some issues are similar... some very different... but the imperfection is the same.

Disappointing isn't it? In fact the Church is often disappointing. In our experience, the Church rarely lives up to the hopes, dreams and expectations we place upon it. Disappointment is part of the Christian experience... indeed there'd be many of us here today who currently harbour feelings of disappointment about the church, or perhaps even about this parish. So what do we do with it?

The danger with disappointment is that we often unconsciously project it onto others. For example, a man bored in his marriage all too often blames it on his partner, saying 'If only she was livelier, more interesting then we'd have a better marriage.' This seems entirely convincing to him... while everyone else knows that until that man starts to look at his own responsibility for the relationship, this marriage is never going to improve... no matter what the woman does!

You see the same behavior in every parish church... the unconscious assumption that our disappointment resides in the fact that someone else is not doing what they should. Often it is 'all the clergy's fault'... and let's face it, the behavior of many priests (present company included) does lay us open to such projection. Some blame the Parish Council... 'It's all *their* fault... they should...' And it doesn't seem to matter that they elect the Parish Council and that the membership changes each and every year, they are still an easy target!

When you think about it's quite amusing... We're always looking at the person on our 'left' thinking that they are more faithful, more courageous, more capable... they have more time, more money, more energy than us... and if only they'd do something about it. And meanwhile... while we're looking to our 'left', they're looking at the person on their 'right'... thinking exactly the same thing.

Disappointment is an inevitable experience in church life ... and the projection it leads us to is both dangerous and dysfunctional. But let's recognise that it's never as simple as being about other people and look a bit deeper.

What factors really determine the health/vitality of any given church at any given time? We speak of church as God's Church... because it is God who calls us into being, and who will bring the church to its eventual fulfilment. It is God who sustains, enables and grows the church - it is God's Spirit who fuels us.

So that's the God factor... and faith says it remains constant and generous. BUT... what we do in response to God's invitation is our choice and responsibility.

And this is anything but constant. Here there is huge variation. The health/vitality of any given church at any given time is determined by the depth and generosity of the people's response to God's invitation.

Now I need to say that there's no doubt priests have a capacity to either help or hinder a church's life, but our ability to determine the outcome of a church is grossly over-rated. We come and go in a community's life... and during our 'relatively short' stay our primary role is to encourage the conversation between the people and the Spirit of God. Because it's in this dialogue, between people and their God, that the real and determining action happens.

So, I wonder - if God wrote us a letter as we are, here and now, what issues would God bring to our attention? I have no doubt that God is trying to get our attention, that there are important things for us to hear and respond to. How are we going?

Imagine that our church is filled with clones of yourself - that is, that every member contributes what you do, and there is no-one else, but these 'you' clones. What does the church look like? What are its strengths and weaknesses? Are you disappointed in it, or excited by it? And then in a moment of prayer ask yourself, 'What sort of a church are you prepared to be?'

That's our challenge today, I believe - to re-imagine the church, if we - each one of us here today - was willing to be honest before God with how we find ourselves, and the gifts we have been given. And please remember, just like the Christians of the Letter to the Hebrews, this is a conversation you're having with God, not with me or anyone else.

In the name of God. Amen.