

Sunday 21 July 2024 – 8 after Trinity

2 Samuel 7.1-14; Ephesians 2.11-end; Mark 6.30-34, 53-end

Sometimes you wonder what the compilers of our lectionary (the weekly readings for both the Eucharist and for Morning and Evening Prayer) are trying to tell us. For example, the Gospel for today comes from Mark chapter 6. It begins at verse 30, having over the past two weeks dealt with the rejection of Jesus at Nazareth, the sending out of the Twelve, and the death of John the Baptist. But instead of continuing with the feeding of the five thousand, and Jesus walking on the water, we are treated to a huge gap, between verses 34 and 53. What remains is the care Jesus shows to his disciples, and some healing work of Jesus showing compassion to the people around Lake Gennesaret, which we call the Sea of Galilee.

Not feeling this was sufficient for a sermon (please complain later) I then had another look at Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, and the passage today contains some rather vital words which must resonate with the world we currently inhabit.

What is Paul saying here ? He is looking at his world of the 1st century, and rejoicing at the change which has been brought about by Jesus's life, death and resurrection, by his promise of forgiveness and peace. He is comparing God's work with ancient Israel, into which Jesus was born, to all nations outside it. Both they and Israel have now been given the chance of a new life, where there is no hostility. With Jesus all people are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God.

If we look at our 21st century world, what do we see ? We can say that after all the wars of religion in earlier centuries, Christians of all denominations now talk to each other and treat each other with brotherly love and respect – more or less. In recent years Russia invaded its

neighbour Georgia and still occupies part of it; more recently it has invaded another neighbour Ukraine and still occupies part of it. My point in mentioning these two conflicts is not to discuss the reasons behind them, but to comment on the attitude adopted by the two countries' orthodox Christian churches, which have been flinging insults and scarcely concealed threats of violence at each other. What has happened to the Christian call to speak peace with each other, or to the duty of Christian churches to speak truth to power? The household of God is not quite functioning as it should be.

Modern Israel has fallen into the same trap, in having failed to follow one of the commandments of its own religion, namely to "love your neighbour as yourself", in its treatment of the Palestinians, who are its direct neighbours, and now they are locked into a cycle of terrible violence.

But peace is not just a matter of relations between states. The peace and love of neighbour which is fundamental to our Christian lives involves relationships between individuals, life partners, families, communities and so on. It's highly personal, and entails not just what we say and do, but also importantly our inmost thoughts, which can represent quite different attitudes from our speech and deeds. I guess this lies at the heart of the tricky progress of the Living in Love and Faith exercise, which every parish and benefice in the country has been required to discuss before General Synod debated it a couple of weeks ago, and predictably the vote was extremely tight in all three Houses, but especially so in the Houses of Clergy and Laity.

So God's gift of Jesus Christ 2000 years ago rests no longer on the ancient Jewish distinction of being circumcised in the flesh in order to be different from everyone else, but on the new gift of his Holy Spirit to work with the weave of every single one of us. This is designed to bring us all into a new state of mind and heart, and so fulfil God's original purpose of bringing the whole creation into unity of purpose.

In order not to neglect the Gospel appointed for today, I changed my mind again: Jesus recognises that his disciples are exhausted from covering considerable distances and from lack of food, and he is encouraging them to come away somewhere and rest awhile and get something to eat. But people follow them and the feeding of the five thousand is the result, which is the subject of a future sermon, possibly next week. Getting away for a holiday, however short, even for only a day, removes us from the daily grind and gives us an opportunity to relax. This is exactly what we all need from time to time to re-energise ourselves. We wish Father Nigel and Liz just such an opportunity when they go on holiday in a week's time. We should resist the temptation to go up to Cumbria and visit them. I wish you all a happy and restful time away.