



Revd Ro's Reflection on The Seventh Sunday after Trinity

Proper 11 Year B

Ephesians 2. 11-22

Mark 6. 30-34, 53-56

Last week we had the account of Herod's killing of John the Baptist. Now we return to the mission of the twelve. They have, we remember, been really successful. They were sent out in twos with Jesus' authority in the name of God. We are told (Mark 6:) ¹²'So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. ¹³They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.'

When we have faced a huge task and finished it. When we have used all our energy there is one thing we need, rest. We need to recharge our batteries. Often Jesus goes away with the disciples to a secluded place to do just that. He goes to be quiet, to pray.

That is how our passage from Mark begins.

³⁰ 'The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. ³¹He 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.'

The crowds won't leave Jesus alone and he knows the disciples need peace. So they get into the boat and go away to a 'deserted place all by themselves.' It should have been the ideal retreat but it didn't work out that way, instead the crowds come from all over and follow him, once again he is surrounded by people all wanting his wisdom and care and indeed healing, lives waiting to be turned around.

Most people in this position desperately in need of rest would have jumped back into the boat cast off and tried again to find a bit of quiet. Jesus doesn't do that, 'he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things'

The words 'sheep without a shepherd' should be familiar now. The leaders of the people should be caring for them, teaching them the true ways of God, however they are 'blind guides' heading straight for the ditch; worse than that they are controlling the people, putting huge burdens on

them to increase their own power. What of the chief shepherd, the king, Herod? We have just had a taste of his behaviour. We have seen his immoral, corrupt, brutal court. Anything further from the good shepherd of psalm 23 it would be hard to imagine.

No, 'The Lord is my shepherd'.

Here then on the shore of the Sea of Galilee is the one who will set the people free, the true shepherd of the sheep. Here is the long awaited Messiah.

Our reading misses two sections and we begin again at verse 53 but what is missed is vital.

³⁵When it grew late, his disciples came to him and said, 'This is a deserted place, and the hour is now very late; ³⁶send them away so that they may go into the surrounding country and villages and buy something for themselves to eat.' ³⁷But he answered them, 'You give them something to eat.' We remember how quiet and hidden the place was before the crowd found him and at evening the disciples tell Jesus to get rid of the crowd because there is nowhere to provide food. Jesus' reply is full of meaning, 'You give them something to eat.' Remember the disciples have been on mission, Jesus has been continuing that work by feeding the people with the word of God. In other words "One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." words familiar from Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The disciples should do the same. So indeed should we.

On a literal level Jesus cares for the physical needs of the crowd and we have the account of the feeding of the five thousand. But for the rest of the time he has been nurturing them by his teaching. Once the crowds have been fed spiritually and bodily Jesus is able to seek rest. The key note of this passage so far is compassion.

⁴⁵ Immediately he made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. ⁴⁶After saying farewell to them, he went up on the mountain to pray.'

The disciples are in the boat. Jesus goes up the mountain to pray, to be with his Father. Prayer is so central to his relationship with God as indeed it must be with ours.

Suddenly a storm arises and Jesus comes to them walking on the water.

⁴⁹But when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought it was a ghost and cried out; ⁵⁰for they all saw him and were terrified. But immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.' ⁵¹ Then he got into the boat with them and the wind ceased. And they were utterly astounded, ⁵²for they did not understand about the loaves, but their hearts were hardened.'

When we read the words, 'their hearts were hardened' that can be misleading. Actually I expect it means they simply were still not clear as to who Jesus was.

This is Jesus, God and man, controlling the laws of nature, vanquishing sin and evil, turning fear to peace. This is the Messiah who is bringing in God's new creation, the Messiah who will rule not only over his people Israel but the whole world. John 12. 47. 'I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.' Jesus is the anointed one, the true shepherd of his sheep.

They cross the lake and come to Gennesaret. Gennesaret is not very far from Capernaum to the north east of the lake. We have seen Jesus cure the woman suffering from haemorrhages in Capernaum and raise the daughter of Jairus. Now we see more of Jesus' healing ministry.

⁵⁴When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him, ⁵⁵and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. ⁵⁶And 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.'

No wonder Jesus' fame was spreading throughout the land. These people see the wonderful works Jesus is doing. He is ministering to the people. He is caring for them just as the good shepherd does in psalm 23. The last line 'begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed' is of course reminiscent of the woman who touched his cloak in faith. Jesus' words 'woman your faith has healed you.' It contrasts starkly with Jesus' ministry in his own home town where the lack of faith meant that he could heal only a few.

Some of these people are coming in faith to Jesus, others because they are desperate for help. Either way they do not turn from him they flock to him knowing he has power and can help. Jesus cares for them, he heals them and he feeds them with not only food as with the five thousand but the bread of life, the words of God. Jesus is in fact living out the commandment he is later to give the disciples at his last meal with them, 'Love one another as I have loved you.' He is loving the people as he loves us now.

Jesus' ministry is revealing just who he is. He is the saviour, the one who is bringing in God's new creation and who will bring it to fruition at Calvary when he vanquishes evil once and for all through love.

'I came not to judge the world, but to save the world.' is really the key to our passage from Ephesians.

Thinking of what I said last week, of the cosmopolitan nature of the population of Ephesus, of the many deities including the cult of Emperor worship; we can imagine the sort of lives these Ephesians had been living before they had heard of Jesus Christ. Our reading begins at verse 11 but at the start of the chapter Paul outlines their old way of life.

^{2,1}'You were dead through the trespasses and sins ²in which you once lived, following the course of this world, following the ruler of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work among those who are disobedient. ³All of us once lived among them in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of flesh and senses, and we were by nature children of wrath, like everyone else.'

Things are so different now that they have heard the words of Paul and his fellow missionaries, now that they have chosen the way of Jesus.

⁸'For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— ⁹not the result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life' Once the people have turned to Jesus they receive the full promises of God, everything Jesus won for humanity is theirs freely given by God's grace. Humanity was far off, separated from God and with no way to him in their own power, nothing that humans could do could achieve unity with God. It was Jesus, who was the bridge between humanity and God. It was Jesus, at his incarnation as both human and divine took on sin and death and vanquished both by love.

Now the promises of God are theirs through the grace of God if they truly turn to Christ. Not just by saying I believe but by living according to his teachings. All the old pagan ways and practices must be put behind them. The old immorality, which might be a part of the old ways and worship, is over and done with.

Now, just as a newly baptised person would wear a white robe as the symbol of purity, that is how their lives must be. They must be washed clean and be dead to sin and alive to Christ.

Paul is the 'apostle to the Gentiles' he is talking to Gentiles. For the Jews the world was split into two, the Jewish nation, chosen by God and then everyone else. Everyone else is the Gentile world.

The Jews looked down on Gentiles, one of the fundamentals of their law then was that Jews and Gentiles didn't mix. We think of the old Jewish prayer, 'Lord I thank you that you have not made me a woman, a slave or a Gentile.' Gentiles were a world apart. Think of Matthew 15 and the story of the Canaanite woman,

"I was sent only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." ²⁵But she came and knelt before him, saying, "Lord, help me." ²⁶He answered, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." ²⁷She said, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." ²⁸Then Jesus answered her, "Woman, great is your faith! Let it be done for you as you wish." And her daughter was healed instantly.'

Jesus did come to the Jewish nation initially; he was the Messiah, the King, the Anointed one, of David's line and the fulfilment of God's prophecies to his people. But so many Jews particularly the leaders simply rejected him and turned their back on God's promises fulfilled in Jesus, as St. John puts it so succinctly:

^{1.10} 'He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

Now the apostles have been sent out in the power of the Holy Spirit to baptise in Jesus' name. Paul has turned his attention to the Gentile world because 'all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,'

This is what Paul is saying to the Ephesians, now you are heirs with Christ if you turn to him. Once there was this huge division and Gentiles were seen as lesser mortals, literally beyond the pale. Indeed they were outside belief in the God of Israel. The Jewish practice of circumcision was a command of God, integral to their law. So much so that it became a generic term, 'So then, remember that at one time you Gentiles by birth, called 'the uncircumcision' by those who are called 'the circumcision' The Gentiles were outside. They worshipped other deities, and as Paul says, — ^{12'}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.'

They were literally lost; the gods they worshipped were a fiction, they had nothing. The so-called gods of these people were not real. Paul is saying quite literally you worshipped nothing, an invented figment. Now however everything is changed. Those who call themselves the 'circumcision' who think that they are superior beings are equally misguided. No, there are not two worlds in Christ, all are one, all are equally loved. Circumcision is a thing done by human hands — just like an idol is made with human hands. That is not important the central thing is this,

^{13'}But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.' They were lost, without hope, far from God whom they could never reach. Now everything has changed. The unifying factor is Jesus, Jesus who 'came into the world to save the world. As Simeon says, (Luke 2.32a) "light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Jesus the Messiah unites everyone who believes in him through his sacrifice at Calvary. There he won salvation for all who turn to him. The promises of God are for all his people and there must be no superiority, no division. Now the Jewish believers and the Gentile believers are one in Christ. Now there is a new people, Christ's people, the followers of the new way. Here are the foundation stones of God's new creation begun in Christ.

^{14'}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.'

What a beautiful verse, Jesus comes to abolish hostility and to replace it with peace. ' My peace I give you, my peace I leave you.' Jesus Christ is the God of love whose commandment is to love. Hostility and division should have no place within Christian life. Now these two great divisions of people, Jew and Gentile, are one in him. As for the first century law that was to separate Jew and Gentile it is abolished in Christ.

¹⁵'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, ¹⁶and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.'

This is God's new creation over which Jesus rules has destroyed barriers. The old hostility has been put to death, destroyed on the cross of Jesus as he won salvation for all. Now Paul says you must go forward in unity, anyone who condemns you as inferior or sees themselves as superior are out of line with the teachings of Christ and are wrong.

¹⁷'So he came and proclaimed peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near;

¹⁸for through him both of us have access in one Spirit to the Father.'

The question of Jew and Gentile may not be central in the church now, but many other divisions are and Christ's teaching that all are equal is a fundamental lesson that the church throughout the world must learn. All human beings are equal in Christ because he gave his life to save us all. We are the family of Christ, the children of God. Can you imagine how freed these Gentiles must have felt. How freeing for any subjugated people to be told, you are free, you are equal and you are loved by God.' What a wonderful message and it is the one we carry to others, the wonderful message of Christ's peace.

¹⁹'So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, ²⁰built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. ²¹In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; ²²in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.'

This metaphor holds a very fundamental meaning. For the Jews the Temple in Jerusalem was everything. It was the centre of everything, why? because for them it was literally the dwelling place of God. Well now Paul says that Jesus is the true temple, the dwelling place of God because he is divine. He is the cornerstone, the pivotal stone that holds all together and we Gentiles and Jewish believers alike are built into that temple and are one with Christ. The people of God are the dwelling of God and Christ is the cornerstone. Just as our church buildings are not the church, the church of God is the people of God. Jesus had superseded the Temple. Look how he has condemned what happens there.

At his death, the 'curtain of the Temple was torn in two.' That is the curtain that keeps people out from the holiest place God's dwelling. Well with Christ's death that is torn in two, we have free access to God and he does not live in buildings he lives in the hearts and minds of all who love him. There must be no barriers, no divisions, no feelings of superiority, Jew or Gentile, male or female, or colour or class or status. In fact there must be no artificial human barriers at all. God so loved the world that he gave his only son in love

The world is God's because he created it and he will bring the new creation to fruition, to be judged and ruled over by Jesus.

Jesus our God humbled himself and became a servant for us, he died the degrading death of a criminal - he loved us that much. Jesus rose again for us and by his life death and resurrection

turned the world's values on their head giving us his example to follow and to be our guide, 'This is our God, the servant king.'

'Deep peace of Christ, the Son of peace to you.' Gaelic blessing.

