

'...and what do you want?'

The Sunday morning sermon for Pentecost 3/10th June 2018, based on 1 Samuel 8:4-20 and Mark 3:20-35, delivered by visiting preacher, Revd Dr Andrew Francis and the worship theme was *'A House Divided?'*

Recently, Janice [my partner] and I moved to a smaller house with a large garden. A fortnight ago, our new large garden workshop-cum-potting shed was delivered as umpteen wooden panels, spars and pieces, with its glazing and over 500 fixings. Yesterday morning our neighbour congratulated us on putting it all together, so we have a workable building, that is fit for purpose.

This echoes the task of the Church as a believing community to build up the household of God from its diverse and disparate heap of God-given pieces to become a workable witness in the world.

The concept of God's 'house' or 'household' is a recurring and important theme throughout the Bible. In its Greek translations, these words are often translated as *oikos* – the word from which we get words like economy, ecology or ecumenical. In my writing as a theologian, my book last year, *OIKOS – God's Big Word for a Small Planet* was published globally, affirming the importance of this theological construct.

Today, using the Lectionary readings, we are called to ask why and how it is important that Christians as part of the believing community, put aside their self-interest and work together for the unity and witness of God's *oikos*. We shall begin by exploring the background in the Hebrew or Old Testament, then discover more about Jesus' teaching in the Christian or New Testament before reflecting together upon our agenda now as the Church.

Firstly, let's look again at that narrative in the First Book of Samuel. Here God's people challenge Samuel that they want their own king "*to be like other nations*". What we find is that in:

- vv.4-10 God reminds Samuel, that they are rejecting God's ways (not Samuel) and gives the warning about what serving a secular king will mean;
- vv.10-18 Samuel tells the people what life will be like: if there are armies to protect self-interest, there will be conscription, officers and armourers, to feed them people will work on the land producing food forcing tithes to be paid, and warning them that there will be slavery and they will all become slaves to the system;
- vv.19-20 The people cry "*No, we want a king over us, to be like other nations – a king who will protect our interests and fight our battles*".

Of course, the mythic imagery is perpetuated as the Wise Men come seeking the infant Jesus "*where is he born to be King of the Jews?*" Yet the adult Jesus parodies this on Palm Sunday riding in on a donkey rather than the warhorse of a secular King.

Secondly, let's listen again to what Jesus himself says in Mark's Gospel, which is itself a staccato preacher's notebook. Traditionally chapter 3's teaching assumes 'the strong man' teaching to apply to the devil. But let's turn that around:

- vv.20-23 “a great multitude” had gathered in the courtyard, clamouring to hear Jesus, preventing he and the disciples from eating. The religious ‘teachers of the law’ arrived to claim that Jesus was possessed; they could not countenance Jesus’ divine mission as it would have usurped their earthly authority;
- vv.23-29 When Jesus says [v.27] “...no-one can enter the strong man’s house to plunder it, without first binding up strong man...”, who is Jesus referring to? Why not himself, rather than the Devil, as the only time that Jesus was bound was in his submission to death upon the cross?
- vv.31-34 To deflect Jesus’ powerful teaching, those ‘teachers of the law’ remarked about his family yet Jesus compounded their failure to undermine him by pointing out that all those around him “doing God’s will” are effectively his mother, sisters and brothers. The believing community are part of God’s own family – a new *oikos*.

Thirdly, let’s reflect upon our task as the Church to bring together God’s household: that *oikos*. This is the believing community in which as we have already sung that we find ‘...courage in our darkness, comfort in our sorrow, solace for the weary...’ to follow the words, works and ways of Jesus. Our worship together is a living weekly manifesto affirming, as we have already sung in that Zimbabwean chorus ‘If you believe and I believe and we together pray...’ that it is together (NB not divided), that God’s Spirit empowers our life and work. The believing community’s task is one of discernment to help give shape to God’s *oikos* and the world in which we live.

In contrast, most people prefer self-interest to discerning ‘the common good’. One topical example is Brexit; how many of us have heard people who voted for it, make comments that reflect self-interest; how much did they discern it might wreck the Good Friday agreement along the Irish border? How often have we heard sovereignty used as a Brexit excuse – this is about people wanting their own sovereignty and governance – just like in 1 Samuel!

So, ‘...what do you want...?’ The very fact that you are here and part of this believing community tells that your *oikos* compass point is the radical Jesus. Daily we face that moment of choice – there can be no sitting on the fence, we follow after Jesus or we don’t.

Christian discipleship is about making our connection with the living God of glory, goodness and gift, revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus as his new *oikos* comes together through the grace and work of the Spirit. Interconnectedness of soul, soil and society is at the heart of an undivided world. It is what Jesus calls us to; it is an *oikos* theology. God presents us with moments of choice. Do we want a king like President Trump, who unilaterally defines the battle lines? Or a society moulded and shaped by the followers of the radical Jesus into God’s new community or ‘household’?

So, what do you want?

Amen

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