

2017-06-18

First Sunday after Trinity

Sermon 134

Sunday Worship

First Put Your Own House in Order

Texts: Exodus 19:2-8a, Romans 5:1-8, Matthew 9:35-10:8

For the love of God in scripture
For the love of God among us
For the love of God within us
Thanks be to God

So now that we've celebrated the arrival of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and the Trinity last Sunday, in the church calendar we return to 'Ordinary Time'. Just so we can all be certain, this is 'Ordinary' capital O, not ordinary in the sense of unexceptional, or unremarkable. Basically this particular 'Ordinary' simply refers to Sundays that are numbered consecutively and which are not part of a specific church season like Advent, Lent, or Easter. I wouldn't want anyone to think that any Sundays were ordinary - in the dull sense of the word - because every Sunday is a day of celebration of the risen Lord Jesus, and with our Gospel and other scripture readings there is always something for us to learn more about.

So let's see what it is that we might consider today...

On Wednesday this week, a week that had already been particularly trying, my manager took me aside into one of our meeting rooms to tell me she would be leaving for a job with a neighbouring local authority.

It wasn't really a surprise because I knew she had been looking, and had already been to a couple of interviews; it will still be a great loss to me though. But I told her that there is something hugely affirming to be recognised as *the* person who could do the job they needed doing - specially as this particular job has a much wider remit, as well as being a step up from her current role.

I wonder if the disciples felt that same affirmation, or whether they were quietly terrified at the prospect of being sent out to put their training into practice! Part of the reason for my week being a difficult one was because the day before my manager's announcement, one of my brand new team members - only 7 days into her new job - handed her notice in. She had apparently, spent those 7 days being quietly terrified, and not feeling at all affirmed in my confidence that she could do the job.

But that's not what I want to explore this morning.

"These twelve Jesus sent out with the following instructions: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the House of Israel."

Now this isn't the only occasion where Jesus had adopted a rather singular approach to his mission. Later on in the gospels we find the Syrophenician woman who came to Jesus seeking healing for her demon-possessed daughter. In responding to her pleading Jesus used the same words as he did in instructing his disciples, "I was sent only the lost sheep of the House of Israel." But he healed her daughter all the same. Prior to the sending out of the disciples we hear about the Roman centurion with a sick servant. Instead of re-stating his ministry as being only to the House of Israel, Jesus was immediately

prepared to go to the Centurion's house. It's an interesting U-turn, especially in a gospel which seeks to firstly present Jesus as being the fulfilment of the prophecies in the Jewish scriptures, but which also includes some key Gentiles in Jesus' family tree - Rahab from Jericho, Rachel from Moab, while Tamar is thought to be a Canaanite. It's quite notable that any women should be included in the long list of Jesus' antecedents at all, so clearly the status of these women is **very** important.

Even at the time of his birth Gentile Magi followed a star for two years to pay homage to the saviour King, a tiny baby. So it feels a bit uncomfortable to hear Jesus instruct his disciples not to stray from those traditionally known as God's chosen people, the 'elect' - the people to whom God was referring when he said "you shall be my treasured possession, out of all the people." Though it must be recognised that this was conditional on the same people obeying the voice of God and keeping his covenant. We also know that the same people responded: "Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do." But it wasn't long before Moses would find them worshipping and cavorting round a golden calf, made for them by Aaron in response to their insistent pestering during the 40 days that Moses was on Mount Sinai.

And so the lost sheep of the House of Israel were an enduring element among God's chosen ones.

But why did Jesus issue the instruction that his disciples should keep well away from the Gentiles?

The persistent presence of lost sheep among the House of Israel underlines the need to deal with the most pressing issue first - a local

problem needs to be dealt with before tackling the same problem at a greater distance - a 'putting in order of your own house' as a priority, as Hezekiah was instructed. Earlier in Matthew's gospel, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus instructed that those who were prone to judging others should first examine themselves, least they also be judged. To have gone preaching and teaching to the Gentile nation while the House of Israel was in disarray would have left the Word of God looking rather foolish: if God couldn't sort out his chosen people, why should he think he could sort out anyone else, who didn't already have a connection with him.

The reality is that during his earthly ministry Jesus did not actively seek out the Gentiles. Those who feature in the Gospels came seeking him, and with far greater faith than the chosen House of Israel.

It's a fact, those who have plenty, tend to take it for granted. While those who have little consider the same things as precious. While children in this country often consider school to be a necessary evil, or just something to be endured, children in much poorer countries where education is much harder to come by, have been found breaking into schools, not with any evil intent, but so that they too can learn, to have a share in such a precious gift.

The House of Israel generally took their relationship with God for granted, and felt that they had cracked it when it came to keeping God on their side. By keeping a myriad of rules they felt secure in the knowledge (misconceived though it was) that God would be happy with them. But they were so wide of the mark that it was simply not sensible to go spreading God's word any further afield.

But the intention that the Word of God should be available to the whole of mankind had existed for centuries before Jesus first sent out his disciples. As early as Genesis 12 God made it clear that from Abram, as he was then known, a great nation would emerge, and that 'all people on earth [would] be blessed through [him], not only those his direct descendants.

So though Jesus did not actually go to the Gentiles to make known the word of God, those who came to him - and notably, came to him with greater faith than the House of Israel - were received by Jesus, and their requests were fulfilled.

As the leader of a small band of disciples there was realistically a limit to how much ground could be covered, especially during what was their apprenticeship. But with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost everything changed. And Jesus had prepared them for that coming.

At the beginning of the Acts of the Apostles Luke tells us that Jesus had told his disciples to stay in Jerusalem to wait for the gift that his Father had promised, and which Jesus had taught them about at the Last Supper. And Matthew records from the Mount of the Ascension that the disciples - now apostles - were to 'go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and to the Holy Spirit.'

And we have that same work to do here. To spread God's Word in this place, in our places of work, and in our homes.

Amen