

Sermon Easter 6 Year C 2019

As we move closer toward winter there comes the inevitable 'winter drop off' on Sunday mornings. More and more of us will chose home comfort rather than face the prospect of an hour and half in a large, cold, draughty church... In some parishes, significant numbers just disappear for months on end at this time of year as people of a certain age migrate north to warmer climes. The phenomenon of 'fair weather Christians' remains a very true thing.

I am sure we have all heard no shortage of reasons why people don't want to come to church. We know that, in the light of serious abuse scandals of late, the aversion to the church is at least understandable. But some people do indeed stay away for something as trivial as the weather. More often now though, the reasons include a crowded weekend schedule. Others leave and stay away because they didn't like the priest or the kind of service on 'offer', as if we were some kind of supermarket to cater to all tastes. Personality clashes, that the church is full of hypocrites, old hurts, change, no change can all see people prefer to stay home and in bed on Sunday mornings.

But one of the loudest objections to people believing and belonging is our divisions. Whether this really is the reason why people leave or stay away we cannot know. But what we *can* know is that this is a charge that is laid against the church, and it is a serious one: *I thought Christians were supposed to love each other, but they're always fighting. If they can't even get on with each other, well, what kind of witness is that? And I don't want a part of it.*

It's a good point. Christians have for a very long time been fighting with each other. Indeed, it has ever been thus, as the first reading today from the book of Acts highlights. Now, we normally have a pretty idealised, rosy view of the infant church. Most of us carry the idea that somehow those first Christians - fired with love for Jesus and filled with the power of the Holy Spirit - lived a prefect, faultless kind of Christian life; that their experience of church and of the Christian community would have been something utterly different from our experience of church and the Christian community.

But I'm afraid the scriptures themselves won't let us get away with that kind of fantasy. Because the church then, as now, was simply made up of human beings, men and women like us, men and women with all the flaws and failings and limitations as all other men and women. So, we're in good company! And the debates and issues which confronted the early church were no less challenging and serious than the ones we face. We can perhaps all too easily overlook how challenging and how serious the issues the early church faced really were. We look at something like the debate over whether circumcision was a necessary requirement to belonging to the family of God and we think how silly that was. Except of course when we remember all the first Christians were faithful Jews, and circumcision was *the sign, the mark* of God's enduring, everlasting promise. A profound mental, spiritual, theological shift was needed to accept that God's covenant promise was being opened to gentiles as well. It was big stuff and it required a great deal of patience and prayer and discernment. And as we hear at the end of the portion from Acts today some sort of compromise was reached.

The good news is that God uses us despite our limitations! God remains present in his church despite *its* limitations! Now, some Christians and some parts of the church relish in setting themselves against others, and imbuing an antagonistic, hostile stance. We buy into the negative image and a negative narrative. We buy into that culture of moaning and groaning and grumbling.

But we will not get very far at all in understanding what the church actually *is* if we only judge it by its limitations. The reading from Revelations today reminds us of some of the *immense dignity* God has invested in the church. In John's vision the heavenly Jerusalem - all gleaming, shining, precious jewels - is an image of the church. God sees the *beauty* of the church, the immense treasure it possesses, with gates on all sides so all may share in its wealth. God doesn't see the grime, the sin, the depravity and the limitations which so often marr *our* experience of the church on earth. God sees its eternal beauty, because it comes from God himself. And this should give us a little shiver down our spine when we think that what we do here our little corner of the world is part of that immense, beautiful, precious treasure! And every Christian - you and I, all of us - share in the wealth of this treasure!

But even more than this, as the gospel assures us today, Christ will come to those who love him and keep his word: *'we shall come him and abide with him.'* We might note here the danger of overfamiliarity with certain parts of Scripture. But this word 'abide' is one of the most potent in all of John's gospel. It comes up again and again. Abide, of course closely linked to our word 'abode' and why sometimes what we hear today is translated as *'make our home with them.'* Other translations suggest 'stay' or 'remain' but these don't really capture the sense of intimacy or closeness that the evangelist is trying to convey here: Christ makes his *home* in us! So, we ought to live lives worthy of this supreme guest! Such is the dignity, the value with which Christ regards us! In these fragile, imperfect vessels of clay Christ makes his home. Christ takes us seriously. We ought take him seriously! Our lives – including the life of the church – ought to convey *Christ is truly present!* He has not abandoned the church! And that should remedy some of the hostility and grumpy negativity that can so easily creep into our life together.

And as any good guest, Christ brings a gift. Christ comes to stay with us, abide with us, and he gives to us his Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate who *'will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you.'* Christ is truly present to his church! Often there is so much anxiety and angst and stress in the church, and especially in the arguments and fights we have, and in the issues we face. But if being Christian means anything, it means taking Christ at his word. His pledge of ongoing presence and guidance should help us relax a bit. If we take the focus off us, and look *to him*, then the problems and issues and difficulties we face come into perspective. We will see that the church really *is* a beautiful thing! We will see that the faith is a wonderful treasure entrusted to us. And we will see that even through our difficulties and limitations, Christ remains with us and guides.

Through our own imperfections and struggles, and the struggle and imperfections we all know to be present in the church as well, we need to keep our sights on its ultimate destiny, the ultimate dignity God us invested us with. We are not our troubles. We are not our shortcomings. We are not our failings. We are made for eternity. Our lives – including our corporate life as believers - need to show our faith in that dignity and destiny. Amen.