

Sermon Ordinary Sunday 11/Trinity 2 Year A 2023

We now move into the long weeks of 'Sundays after Trinity'. In some places, this is known as 'ordinary time'. This is one of the curious innovations of the liturgical reforms from last century. Before the late 1960s, there was no such thing as 'ordinary time' in the church! We have had, of course, a few 'green weeks' already this year between Epiphany and Lent, which we call the 'Sundays after Epiphany'. Those weeks were like small paddocks on the suburban fringes of our cities. But as we move into these green weeks after Trinity, it is as if we are heading out into wide-open countryside. It is an expanse that runs now until the end of November. We'll have a little detour, or 'rest stop' mid-August to celebrate the Assumption of Mary. But the rest of this time we will settle into the deep patterns and contours of our regular, 'ordinary' life of faith. And this year we will do this especially in the company of Matthew, as we journey in a sustained way with that particular gospel.

As we set out into the wide green expanse ahead of us, it is useful to have some pointers to help identify the landscape we find ourselves in. It is useful to have some markers to help tell us where we are. The ancient inhabitants of this land of course read their landscape like a book. But for many ancient cultures a tree, a mound or hill, a set of standing stones, helped communicate to a people who they were, where they were, and where they were going.

The three scripture lessons appointed for this day all – in one way or another – provide such markers for us as we set out on our journey, through the open green expanse of these Sundays after Trinity. In fact, they help provide markers for our life of faith in general. They all help signal to us what should be clear to every Christian: *who are we, what do we believe, and what are we meant to do?* Of course, no single selection of any Bible reading will say everything there is to say about these matters. But what is offered us today - in distilled form - are some key responses to those key questions: who are we, what do we believe, and what are we meant to do?

The Old Testament lesson today from the Book of Exodus places the people of Israel firmly in their desert wandering. They are *not* in open green fields, but a wilderness landscape! They have left Egypt, they have crossed the Red Sea, they have received the manna that will sustain them for 40 years, but are yet to receive the Ten Commandments. That comes in the chapter that follows. But even in these few verses, we are given a clue to the question, *who are they? What does it mean to be the people of God?*

And so, we are told, God instructs Moses, *Say this to the House of Jacob, declare this to the sons of Israel, 'you yourselves have seen what I did with the Egyptians, how I bore you on eagles wings, and brought you to myself.'* God's people are those who have been rescued. Saved. Now, Egypt can stand for many things. In the biblical imagination, Egypt is *not* so much a geographic location in northern Africa. Egypt is the place of oppression and enslavement. Egypt is the place of enticement, and of forgetfulness.

We know Egypt! We know Egypt within ourselves. It is our sins. It is those things within us that keep us bound, which diminish us and enslave us. We know Egypt's hold over us, how it entices us. And we know that however much we try, by our own effort we cannot free ourselves. What is expressed here is simply the gospel of grace! It is God and God alone who frees us, liberates us, who delivers us from captivity and leads us to the Land of Promise. Who are we? We are the people saved by grace.

And we know Egypt from the world around us, the cultural, political, social context we find ourselves in. As we know, as faithful, orthodox believers we find ourselves in hostile territory. Because 101 things (1001 things!) are clamoring for our allegiance, and we show allegiance to the Lord Christ. And because we do not really belong here. Our citizenship is elsewhere. If we are not careful, we will find ourselves making mud bricks, and creating idolatrous cities. But Egypt is *not* our home (even though plenty of churches and plenty of Christians act as if it is!). Just as we need deliverance from our personal spiritual oppression, so too we need deliverance from the dark forces currently at work about us. And again, this will come from God, and not by our political activism or our campaigning, or our political savviness. Salvation comes from God alone, who, if we allow him, will bear us on eagles' wings.

So, the first thing to understand about ourselves is that we are the people whom God saves. And God saves us to *be* something. *Now therefore if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.... You shall be to me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* Who are we? We are the people God saves, and we are the people who are *called*. *You shall be to me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* This idea of being a people called and *set apart* is at the very heart of what it means to be the people of God. It is really the idea of consecration: dedicated or set apart for a special purpose. St Peter in his first epistle expresses the very same ideas, *But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.*

We are called, set apart, consecrated to bear witness to the light. Importantly, we bear witness as *a people*, as a holy nation. This is one of the great gifts and mysteries of our faith! We are not meant to struggle on our own! We do it in the company of others, in communion with others. Indeed, the only way we can survive in Egypt is *as a people*, as a community. It is one of the great lessons of faith – and so goes against our individualized, personalized approaches to life and faith - that I actually need others, and that others need me... I read something this week which put this quite starkly: *if you say you love Jesus but do not love the church, then you do not love Jesus*. Being a follower of the Lord Christ, loving him, means loving his body, the church.

Now, our calling – our vocation if you like – to be a holy people, a people set apart, is made all the more critical by our captivity in Egypt. But by the quality of our lives – obedient to God, keeping his covenant (in the terms of the reading today) we will propose another way of being, another way of living, another way of being human in a world that desperately needs to see these alternatives. The continued descent into factionalism, violence, and addiction simply highlights the critical role we can play.

And this just goes to remind us that *what* we believe has very practical consequence. We do not believe, we are not saved, we are not called simply for our personal therapy and wellbeing! The life of God is not about self-actualization! The epistle reading from Romans today highlights this, and helps answer this question, *what do we believe?* Well, we believe in Jesus, and that his righteous death has a saving effect, and that he has brought reconciliation. If we were looking for one idea, or one word, one concept that helps convey what Jesus saving work affects, it is this: reconciliation. This is his ‘marvellous light’. This is what is worth proclaiming! This is good news! And it is precisely this which has such practical consequence. Because its message is that we do not have to be estranged or at enmity with God. We do not have to be estranged or enmity within ourselves. We do not have to be estranged or at enmity with each other. This is good news! And good news as needed and as challenging today as it ever was!

The gospel today expresses this work of reconciliation again very practically. Those who act with Christ’s authority, *cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse lepers, cast out devils*. In other words, the agents of Christ – you and I - are sent out to bring wholeness and healing. Reconciliation. The church’s life - our life - does not just exist for itself. There is always an outward-looking dimension. As we head toward that wide horizon, we have markers to help point the way. And they tell us that we are a people *saved*. We are a people *set apart*. And we are a people *sent out* with the gospel of reconciliation. Amen.