

Sermon, St Andrew's
1 Corinthians 12.2-10, Mark 6.1-13, 4th July 2021

Almighty God, what is Thy Spirit saying to the Churches?

In Thy Name, one God, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

“What the Spirit says to the Church” is a common refrain in the letters to different churches at the start of Revelation - and a good question for most Scripture and sermons!

This morning we have two very different visions of the life of faith. How can these help us?

St Paul's letter talks about a vision which seemed to overwhelm him - a strange and indescribable vision: and Paul is rarely lost for words! It can often be helpful to notice what things are mentioned a lot in the Bible, and what's mentioned less - there can be some interesting clues about what matters in religion: and also what is beyond words.

The Church has often rightly been cautious about mystic, ecstatic visions - because these can be infinitely precious, holy and special gifts: or the product of eating too much cheese last thing at night! They can be disturbing - the prophet Daniel, for example, often doesn't understand what he sees, but finds it uncomfortable - and St Paul elsewhere advises us to “test the spirits”, to see if what we perceive is consistent with what we know of the loving life of God... But they may be a foretaste of Heaven ahead of us - there can be a sense of *deja vu* about such experiences: Eliot suggests that “the end of all our exploring / will be to arrive where we started / and know the place for the first time”...

Such intense personal religious experience often needs wisdom to help it bear fruit, and the support of others' discernment in checking and understanding what's been seen, felt or experienced.

Even Paul himself is unusually careful of this experience - reluctant even to admit that it happened to him - and very concerned to stay rooted and grounded in our present physical reality (Herbert writes of prayer as "heaven in ordinary", a similar coming of God down to earth). Paul seems to jump straight into a counterbalance or antidote, some "thorn in the flesh" - many of us, as we go through life, may be more familiar with those than with the mystic experience that he hints at earlier! But, whatever the hidden detail of this passage, the overall message is clearer: that any vision, glimpse or sense of the awe, majesty, wonder and fullness of Almighty God is a gift beyond words, to be received thankfully, held gently, and shared humbly.

It sometimes helps to read the passages just before and after the one that you're trying to understand; but 2 Corinthians 12 is perhaps strangely helped by 1 Corinthians 12, where the Church is described as a body, all with different gifts and roles. Perhaps such ecstatic visions are best placed in that context, among the richness of God's gifts to us all, with those who may have the complimentary gifts of how best to share God's graces. Maybe we should receive any visions the way we receive the Sacrament - in attitudes of careful, humble thankfulness, knowing that the gift is far beyond our (un)worthiness.

And what does our Gospel say? Another vision of the life of faith, of the Kingdom, that may seem very unlike our Church life week to week - but then of course the Gospels don't mention the Church much directly!

I find it so reassuring that even Christ Himself cannot always succeed or bear fruit - the “prophet without honour”: and this passage is radically different from conventional views of the Church: a vision of Christians called and sent, empowered and equipped, to help bring change to people’s lives; healing and transformation. The tradition of door-to-door preaching has deservedly acquired a bad reputation - but for years I found delivering Christmas cards in the parish such a joy: so many people delighted to simply receive a gift - to not be asked to sell something - and to see a sign that anyone (even the Church!) cares about those who are most downtrodden, busiest, underpaid, struggling and harassed (“like sheep without a shepherd”). What might our mission in God look like, for the 99% of the population who no longer come to church? This Gospel vision encompasses failure, of both Christ and ourselves, but calls us to careful consideration of where each of us we might be sent, and how we equip ourselves for that spiritually, in the Spirit - even if our social circle has shrunk to a few weekly visitors, or to those alongside us in the usual hospital waiting room. Putting these two readings together gives us a very striking vision of the life of faith - although asking “why are these readings together” probably actually has the prosaic answer that we had the preceding chapters last week! (though I haven’t checked...)

But here we are given hints that our spiritual life may well be stranger than we expect - that we may be lit by the light of stranger, surpassing gifts and graces among our Church communities - that our life together may best proceed by humble, thankful sharing, in which no-one is spiritually superior for what they’ve “seen”, but where such gifts shouldn’t be airbrushed out either: and that our life is meant to be poured out, shared on the road, according to God’s

grace in each of us, wherever we are called and sent: the breadth of God's love encompasses all the thorns in our flesh, and profound failure. Many of our strongest hymns are those which lift failure up into the greater grace of God, His power made perfect in our weakness:

“He who would valiant be ‘gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master”...

Or, from “Father, hear the prayer we offer”, the “tough” version of Psalm 23:

“Be our strength in hours of weakness,
in our wanderings be our guide;
through endeavour, failure, danger,
Father, be thou at our side.”

When we are weak, God is strong.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,
AMEN.