

Sermon for the Third Sunday after Trinity (B) - 21.6.15

St James' Cambridge – The Revd Deborah Ford

“...We urge you (also) not to accept the grace of God in vain...See, *now* is the acceptable time; see, *now* is the day of salvation! ...*Open wide* your hearts...” (2 Corinthians 6:2, 13)

- I'm sure I'm not the only one here who's been appalled by the news of those shot dead whilst praying in a Bible study group in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston earlier this week. All the more horrifying because it seems they might have been targeted because of their race.
- Today's Old Testament Reading is very fitting: the beginnings of Saul's jealousy of David, as the crowds begin to compare and celebrate this young 'stripling's (Saul's words) success more than Saul's.
- It's just one of so many stories of those struggling with jealousy, rivalry and ambition in the Bible, isn't it? Whether it's Cain and Abel; or Sarah and Hagar; Jacob and Esau; Joseph and his brothers or the disciples themselves (James and John), asking to sit in glory on either side of Jesus when that day comes.
- It's so hard for us human beings to see and let *others* take the glory without somehow being threatened by it. And it often leads to comparisons, competition and trying to put the other down.

- I remember how for many years I couldn't stand my younger sister. My younger brothers were less of a threat, somehow, but Jen (once she reached a certain age) was far too pretty and clever and close to my heels for my liking. She always wanted to copy me: whether it was the way I dressed or wore my hair, or the piano pieces or games I played. I hated it – and of course the more I hated it, the more she enjoyed playing on it. My mother's response was "Well, you know they say imitation is the sincerest form of flattery." It did *not* help.
- It took many years for us to each feel secure enough to be able to realise and appreciate our similarities and differences as gift rather than as threat. I'm sure it could all be explained away as 'pretty normal sibling rivalry', but how sad we couldn't get there sooner.... All those years of misunderstanding, hurt, distrust and not being able to even *see* each other.
- It was the very *opposite* of the psalmist's "**How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down upon the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down over the collar of his robes...**" or (for those who think that sounds a bit messy): "**it's like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion.**" (Ps 133:1-3)
- God's covenant with his people and the exodus out of slavery in Egypt was the beginning of a *new and different* way: where unity, justice, peace and love are not only ideals for the future, but a *living reality now*.

- That's what Paul's talking about in his letter to the early Christian community in Corinth. He's someone who knows exactly what it is to be misunderstood and perceived as a deep threat (just as David did -or the church members in Charleston). And he's already been made to pay for it in all sorts of ways.
- But he knows that he's not alone: he knows that he can only do it through God's strength in him. And despite terrible hardship, he has *confidence* in God – not in his own strength or ability – but in *God's* faithfulness and goodness. However hard things are, he knows God has always been loyal and true to him.

“We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.” (2 Corinthians 6: 8-10)

- It's one of my favourite passages in the Bible. *Whatever* we might be going through, with God there's always an '*and yet.*'
- I expect Martin (Seeley, who's now taken up his 'throne' as Bishop of Edmundsbury and Ipswich) has quite a lot of awe, fear and trepidation (as well as excitement) at the responsibilities entrusted to him.... *And yet* he trusts that God will be true and fulfill his calling in him. I'm sure Jutta, Anna and Luke have a whole mixture of feelings too, as they prepare to leave Cambridge: *and*

yet they know God is with them and leading them into fullness of life.

- St James will be entering a period of interregnum and change... *and yet* we know God has been incredibly faithful and will continue to be. Jesus is right here in our midst saying “Peace... Don’t be afraid... *Trust* me.”
- Secular society and the media keep trying to tell us “The Church is dying...” *and yet* we know that we are alive.
- The families and friends of those killed in Charleston are bereft in their grief *and yet* they keep praying, daring to hope and trust in God’s mercy: they’re able to keep their hearts open and vulnerable.
- In the gospel reading, the disciples find themselves in terrible tumult *and yet* they know God can do *anything*, This is the God who’s brought light out of darkness; order out of chaos and nothingness and life out of even death itself.
- Storms *do* blow up, don’t they? And they *will*... That’s the reality of the world as it is now. And there is a danger, when old wounds are reawakened and we’re reminded of the awful legacy of slavery, apartheid and racism we still carry, that people will polarize and resort to hatred, fear, violence and despair.
- As one of the residents of Charleston said yesterday: “There’s a black cloud hanging over Charleston. It’s really hard...”

- There are some big clouds hanging over the world: many people live in daily fear.
- A group of Muslim students (from the Cambridge Muslim College off Hills Rd) are doing a placement at the hospital at the moment and it's been awful to see how frightened they are of going to see and talk to patients on the wards.
- When, after an introductory session about the hospital and chaplaincy, I asked "What are your main hopes and fears?" One of them raised his hand immediately, saying, "But I've got a beard... I look like a Muslim. I don't think people will want to see me." "But why *wouldn't* they?" I asked, surprised (and rather dreading his answer), "Why would you expect people *wouldn't* want to see you?" He didn't answer. When I asked gently, "Is that what you've found round about in Cambridge?" He hung his head, nodded and said "Yes."
- I was shocked to hear it: Charleston suddenly seeming very close to home. But there have also been some amazing testimonies of hope and faith this week:
- As the suspect of the shootings appeared in court the other day, the mother of one of the victims spoke to him via the video link: "I'm aware that I'm a work in progress and that I'm very angry with you just now, but I also know we're a family that *love* has built. We have no hate: we have to *forgive*."

- The sister of another victim said, “Actually, I feel a lot of love. I feel a little bitter, but I also feel a lot of love.”
- She knows and lives the reality of **“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.” (John 1:5)**
- As Jesse Jackson put it: ‘We *do* have legacy of slavery: it *is* still a battle: but it’s a battle we’re *winning* and we’re *still* winning. Although all the reform and legislation in the world wont stop hatred: we need to teach people how to *love*.’
- That’s why Paul urges us: ‘Don’t accept the grace of God in you in vain!’ Jesus’ death and resurrection, has begun a *radical* re-ordering and healing of the structures of society and of all creation – don’t take it for granted!
- *All that resists, undermines, opposes and distorts Gods’ life and love and truth in us will be fulfilled in the One in whom all things hold together and are reconciled.’ (Colossians 1:17)*
- Something *amazing* has happened on the cross: a new *power* has been released and absolutely nothing or anyone is going to stop it. We’re invited to be co-workers with God – swept up in the life and energy of his Spirit - Jesus is *alive*.
- What an amazing thing! For the world to live in unity we *all* need to take our part: however small or insignificant it may seem to be, whether we’re black or white; rich or poor; Jew, Christian, Muslim, gentile...part of *one* people: that’s the *fullness* of who

God's created us to be: the fullness of his glory and image in us: the One in whom there is *more* than plenty for *all*.

- So, says Paul, 'Open *wide* your hearts!' Let God expand your very capacity so you can take in more! *That's* how my kingdom is going to be fulfilled! Let yourselves begin to imagine it!
- The Greek for 'opened wide' means 'broadened out' – it's the same word as for 'plateau' – and the word translated as 'affections' means 'guts' (or 'bowels' - *splanknios*)– the place deep down inside us where we're moved the most.
- It's the deep compassion with which the Prodigal Father is filled for his wayward son; the pity by which the Good Samaritan is moved by; the "tender mercy" with which God's heart goes out as his dawn breaks upon our darkness... and the compassion with which Jesus is moved when he sees people like sheep without a shepherd and the widow of Nain when her only son has died.
- *That's* the life of the Holy Spirit in us.... Moving and opening our hearts to reach out to one another. It's what changes the world.
- I wonder what it might mean for us? Paul says 'Don't waste a minute! The moment is *now*!
- So as we prepare to receive afresh God's love poured out for us in bread and wine, let us pray:
Come Holy Spirit... Open wide our hearts: unsettle our complacency and calm our fears.... Give us a glimpse of your glory that goes deeper than all that threatens to divide us and help

us to love one another as you have loved us. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Or:

Lord, give us to know that we are welcome in your world; that you have created and chosen and called us each by name to be your friends, sisters and brothers; help us to overcome the darkness of self-doubt, the dread of being found unworthy, the mistrust of love; the ignorance that flinches from the truth. Give us the faith that believes all things, trusts all things and hopes all things. Give us the love that casts out fear & the confidence to live as children in our Father's house; now and evermore. Amen.

Readings for Trinity 3 (B)

1 Samuel 17:57-18:5; 10-16

On David's return from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with the head of the Philistine in his hand. ⁵⁸Saul said to him, 'Whose son are you, young man?' And David answered, 'I am the son of your servant Jesse the Bethlehemite.'

18:5 David went out and was successful wherever Saul sent him; as a result, Saul set him over the army. And all the people, even the servants of Saul, approved.

[6 As they were coming home, when David returned from killing the Philistine, the women came out of all the towns of Israel, singing and dancing, to meet King Saul, with tambourines, with songs of joy, and with musical instruments. And the women sang to one another as they

made merry, ‘Saul has killed his thousands, and David his tens of thousands.’⁸ Saul was very angry, for this saying displeased him. He said, ‘They have ascribed to David tens of thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands; what more can he have but the kingdom?’⁹ So Saul eyed David from that day on.]

¹⁰ The next day an evil spirit from God rushed upon Saul, and he raved within his house, while David was playing the lyre, as he did day by day. Saul had his spear in his hand;¹¹ and Saul threw the spear, for he thought, ‘I will pin David to the wall.’ But David eluded him twice.

¹² Saul was afraid of David, because the LORD was with him but had departed from Saul.¹³ So Saul removed him from his presence, and made him a commander of a thousand; and David marched out and came in, leading the army.¹⁴ David had success in all his undertakings; for the LORD was with him.¹⁵ When Saul saw that he had great success, he stood in awe of him.¹⁶ But all Israel and Judah loved David; for it was he who marched out and came in leading them.

Psalm 133

¹ How very good and pleasant it is
when kindred live together in unity!

² It is like the precious oil on the head,
running down upon the beard,
on the beard of Aaron,
running down over the collar of his robes.

³ It is like the dew of Hermon,
which falls on the mountains of Zion.
For there the LORD ordained his blessing,
life for evermore.

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

As we work together with him, we urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain. ²For he says, ‘At an acceptable time I have listened to you, and on a day of salvation I have helped you.’

See, now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation! ³We are putting no obstacle in anyone’s way, so that no fault may be found with our ministry, ⁴but as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵beatings, imprisonments, riots, labours, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, ⁷truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸in honour and dishonour, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything.

¹¹ We have spoken frankly to you Corinthians; our heart is wide open to you. ¹²There is no restriction in our affections, but only in yours. ¹³In return—I speak as to children—open wide your hearts also.

Mark 4:35-41

³⁵ On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, ‘Let us go across to the other side.’ ³⁶And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. ³⁷A great gale arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. ³⁸But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, ‘Teacher, do you not care that we

are perishing?’³⁹ He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, ‘Peace! Be still!’ Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.⁴⁰ He said to them, ‘Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?’⁴¹ And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’