

Trinity 7 2021

Jeremiah 23:1-6

Psalms 23

Ephesians 2:11-end

Mark 6:30-34,53-end

I spent a while studying in Rome as part of my formation for ordination. I say studying, but I also made a point of seeing a different church every day.

Now there are a lot of churches in Rome; and for me the baroque ones in particular started to merge into one another after a while. Maybe it is something about my English sensibility, but they did not immediately appeal. Far more attractive were the simple, hidden Romanesque churches.

But one church, which initially held little attraction for me aesthetically, turned out to be a source of great inspiration. And that is because of the little oratory which it holds in memory of its founder. The Chiesa Nuova was the first church of what became the Oratorian Congregation, and it was founded by St Philip Neri. The Brompton Oratory down the road here is another of their churches.

Not I think greatly known outside the Catholic world, Neri was a key figure in the Counter Reformation – the movement which reformed the Catholic Church in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries, largely in response to the Protestant Reformation.

And there was one key relic in this oratory which caught my imagination. Encased in gold and crystal are St Philip Neri's joke glasses. I had to check my guide's description, but yes, here were the saint's joke spectacles, now venerated as a relic.

For St Philip Neri had a great sense of humour, and would dress up as more serious cardinals to mock them and bring them down to earth. He also started a tradition, a short-lived one I think, of making new cardinals process around Rome holding his cat, to instil a sense of humility in them.

St Philip became so known for holiness, that out of humility he started to develop ways to counteract that reputation. He would walk around Rome in big white shoes for example, and with his clothes inside out.

And he was a great advocate of the sacrament of confession, and was known for his particularly creative penances: two members of his community quarrelled constantly, so he made them dance together. One gave a particularly flamboyant sermon, clearly bigging up his own eloquence more than preaching the gospel, and St Philip made him repeat it endlessly, so that people said, '*He only has one sermon*', thus successfully deflating his ego.

And St Philip thought the best way to bring people to faith (and he was known for transforming the lives of the urchins of Rome in particular, many of whom would follow him in procession) was to be silly one minute, and then to turn on a dime to great seriousness.

And, despite the picture built up by his japes, at the heart of all he did were the needs of others and his devotion to Christ.

One striking thing he did was to give people the key to his bedroom, so that should they feel the need to make their confession while he slept, they could wake him. I don't think they had safeguarding officers then.

And I was reminded of this practice of his by the experience of the apostles in our gospel passage today.

The disciples are frantic, and are telling Jesus of all they are doing, when Jesus bids them, '*Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.*'

But people saw and recognised them, and ran round the shore to greet them with more clamour once they landed.

I hope they got some rest on the journey at least!

Rather than apologising to the disciples, that this was no longer the deserted place advertised, we are told that Jesus had compassion on those who had gathered, and began to teach them.

The word 'compassion' in English is I think a little weak, for the Greek word used here is εσπλαγνισθη, literally meaning that Jesus's guts were affected by his response. And rather than feeding them, as he would do later, he first taught them.

This is also a good microcosm of what is at the core of the life of the Church, as we seek to imitate Christ: both taking time for contemplation and devotion in prayer and the sacraments; and loving response to the deepest needs of others, in teaching what has been handed down to us, and in meeting more material needs.

Over the last fortnight there has been a storm of criticism of the Church of England's new 'vision', as it is inevitably called, to plant 10,000 new lay-led churches by 2030. The canon responsible has said that those churches will be freed from the 'key limiting factors' of expensive buildings and priests with expensive theological education.

Now, we only have just over 10,000 parishes as things stand, so that is quite a lot of new churches! And at a time when many of those parishes are struggling to stay afloat.

But new is thought to be better.

You clearly do have to have some kind of plan, and we are going to be having conversations here over the next few months about what we should be focussing on over the next few years.

But I think where I disagree with the Church of England's so-called vision is in its measure of success.

We do hear numbers in the gospel, not least the episode that follows immediately after this – the feeding of the 5,000.

And we are called to go out and make disciples of all the nations, and to baptise in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

But at the heart of that is listening to God and responding to our brothers and sisters in need. And that must be done through prayer, and person

by person, through individual encounter and personal transformation, rather than by pursuing arbitrary numerical targets. Just as Jesus pulled his disciples away from their frantic, self-generating activity.

We can only follow if we listen, and allow our own souls to be restored, as the Psalmist puts it.

If we have confidence that *'we are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone,'* as St Paul puts it.

Our salvation, and that of the world, thankfully does not depend on the Church of England, and it certainly does not depend on her strategies, or 'visions'.

But if we have confidence that we are part of something far bigger, the Church Universal, and the City of God no less, then others might actually want to join us, and they may even be transformed by the love of God, which we show in our compassion, in our visceral love for those whom we serve.

Fear and desperation do not change the world, and nor does taking ourselves too seriously, as St Philip Neri knew so well.

Taking God seriously on the other hand, in our contemplation, our prayer and our theology, and not being embarrassed to show His fierce love to those around us: that continues to change the world, and is the duty entrusted to all of us who call ourselves Christians.

Amen