

Proper 17 A

As we reflect on events in the news this last week and events due to be happening over the next few days, we are challenged, as ever, to make the connections between these events and our lives as disciples of Jesus. This challenge is heightened in our Gospel reading today by Jesus telling Peter that his, completely common sense, response to his teaching that he must “go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering - - - and be killed” was in fact the result of him being influenced “not by divine things, but by human things”. Peter had just acknowledged, through divine guidance, that Jesus was indeed the Christ – but he still had not accepted the implications of just how the Christ was to play his role in the working out of God’s purposes, for his people and, his whole creation.

In our Old Testament reading we heard part of the account of the call of Moses and the revelation of the Divine Name (which Rome has told us we should no longer utter – in the old Hebrew Tradition!). This passage from the Book of the Exodus tells us what kind of God it was who revealed himself – he is the God who sets his people free from slavery, that they may be the means by which all peoples are, ultimately set free. This was the God of Moses and the God of Jesus – whose “purpose is to give life in all its fullness” (Catholic Living Bible) “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly” (NRSV) (John 10:10). This is our God today – the same yesterday, today and forever and this is his Good News.

The Good News we are invited and commanded to proclaim, by our words and by our deeds. St Paul, in the passage we heard from his letter to the Romans urges us to ensure that the love which binds us together is genuine. Nothing is as likely to hinder the spread of the Good News, than it be seen to emanate from a community that is not obviously striving to live it. Jesus told us that the world will know we are his friends by the love we have for one another, the corollary is that if the world looks on a divided and embittered Church it will not recognise us as his friends and our

proclamation of the Gospel will be hindered. Paul speaks in the first few verses of the passage we heard today (Romans 12:9-21) of how we should relate to each other in the community of faith – “mutual affection”, “showing honour”, “be ardent”, “serve the Lord”, “rejoice in hope”, “be patient in suffering” be generous and hospitable and “persevere in prayer” – all these are signs to the wider world of a community seeking to live the Gospel. The second part of the Epistle set for today speaks of how we are to relate to the wider world; these sayings may often seem to be contrary to the ways which the world would expect people to behave – just like Peter responding to Jesus’ words that the way of God necessitated him suffering and dying.

We need, through our prayer and reflection, to ensure that we are truly seeking to relate in *godly* ways, that we are being faithful to the purposes and ways of God and that we are not sucked in by the allurements and distractions of the passing world. The world is here to be treasured and enjoyed, it is the context in which we “may have life and have it abundantly” but that life in all its fullness can only be experienced as a result of faithfulness and obedience to the Good News.

Our city is in the midst of a process of intense physical and material regeneration. Regeneration is very much a Christian concept but it must be regeneration concerned with every area of life if we are to experience “life in all its fullness”. We each need regenerating day by day – and that is a spiritual regeneration; a regeneration resulting from waiting upon God, adoring him, listening to him, giving thanks, repenting and experiencing his forgiveness - exactly the kind of living Paul spoke of in our Epistle today. Spiritual regeneration is something we need to witness to by our lives and our speaking because it is something each and every person needs. How is this to be experienced in our city? Lots of ways: this coming Thursday, there is the opening of the Highcross Centre – a great mecca of shopping, of leisure activities and a place of residence. There will be much to celebrate – new architecture, new jobs, new wealth brought into our city, a celebration of our rich diversity. The Friendship Garden in the Cathedral precincts will offer another perspective, emphasising the need for

friendship, the need to take a rest and reflect, the opportunity for space to prayer, the importance of the quiet oasis as well as the busy market place. We will have ecumenical prayers at lunchtime – praying for our city, as the family of Jesus, gathered in this place. Later in the evening the Street Pastors will be mingling with the crowds in the city centre as one small sign of God’s care for all. Soon we will be running a retail and workplace chaplaincy to minister to people of all faiths and one in their places of work. It isn’t either or but both and – what is going on in the Highcross, on the streets and in the workplaces of our city is one aspect of “life in all its fullness”, what we are offering, is another. What is going on here, in the SP ministry, in the chaplaincy and in the witness of many individual people of faith is more than just “another aspect” it is at the very heart of all wholesome regeneration. Without spiritual regeneration, all else will be a house built on sand (even if an architecturally splendid house costing many millions). This is something we can each participate in by our prayers, our actions and our commitment to work for a better city.

A vital part of spiritual regeneration is “social regeneration”. The prophet urged us to pray for the peace and prosperity of the city but it is vital that all have access to this prosperity and peace. If our city is to be one in which people may know life in abundance, we must do all we can to ensure that all can participate, that our diversity is truly acknowledged in the plans and their realisation. This includes a whole range of things, many of them the responsibility of the City Council and others – but each and every citizen has a role to play, and we as faithful Christians, in particular. Good public transport, good health care, good education, safer streets, hospitable caring and respectful communities.

All this springs, for us, from the God in whom we believe - the Lord God, Jahweh, revealed as One who longed that his people would know life in all its fullness, free from oppression and fear in their many manifestations. St Paul spoke of the way we should order our lives to celebrate God’s love, both within the Christian community

and in our relationships with others. Jesus reminded Peter, and us, that in all things we are to seek to walk in God's ways, not the world's ways. We pray, therefore, for the grace of faithfulness to live, and to proclaim, Christ Crucified, Risen and Glorified in our own lives, in the life of the Church and in the life of this city and county, that all people may come to know the regenerating love and mercy of God, experience life in abundance and cooperate for the building of a truly godly city.