

THIRD SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Genesis 18:1-15; Psalm 116:1, 10-17; Romans 5:1-8; Matthew 9:35 - 10:23

Scripture teaches us that we are supposed to be open, not only to God and neighbor, but also to growth. Unfortunately a lot of congregations are wrapped up in self-preservation, of maintaining the traditions of the past, and passing the way things are done in the church now on to future generations, unchanged.

The most commonly quoted phrases we hear at vestry meetings in such churches are: "We have always done it this way" and "But, we've never done that before."

There is, of course, a huge difference between being open and being gullible. Tradition doesn't invite us to believe anything and everything as we grow on our faith journey, but it does claim that faith is active, it is more a verb than a noun. In the profession of our faith in the creeds, we don't proclaim our faith about God, we say we believe and trust in God.

Today's Scripture readings are reminders of what faith is really about. Last week, we heard Abraham's call to leave the security and comfort of his homeland, and journey into an unknown future. Today that story continues in a tale of God appearing at Abraham's tent in the form of three strangers. We don't know if there was anything outwardly special about the men, other than that they were unknown to him. Abraham would have been bound by ancient tradition to show hospitality to strangers, so he welcomes them, offers them water for washing and refreshment, and orders them a splendid meal. One of the strangers asks

about Sarah and says that in due time he will return, and Sarah will conceive and bear a son. Sarah laughs at the notion that, in their nineties, she and Abraham will have a child. Rebuked by the stranger, she is afraid. However, the impossible happens, and she gives birth to Isaac. The cynical laughter of one who believes nothing new is possible, is replaced with the joyful laughter of one whose old age has been the occasion of unexpected new life.

For Paul, as well as for Abraham and Sarah, being welcoming is not about occasional entertainment, but a whole new way of being. Justified by faith, we are able to abandon our defenses in joyful anticipation of the new life to come. If suffering is involved, caused perhaps by the laughter of unbelief, such suffering produces character, endurance and hope, hope which, like Abraham's and Sarah's, is not disappointed, because the love of God has been revealed in the undeserved suffering of Christ on our behalf. To be a Christian, then, is to live a life of radical openness and hospitality to God's amazing grace, and to one another, and in so doing to reveal God's reign already at work in our world. It is not gullible optimism, a belief that "all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds", but rather a courageous proclamation that the forces of this world do not have the last word.

In the Gospel, Jesus proclaims the good news of God's kingdom, with miracles of healing, then commissions the twelve to go out and expand his work among "the lost sheep of the house of Israel". Perhaps Jesus himself had a somewhat limited view of his own mission, or saw the renewal of Israel as simply the first step in restoring Israel's vocation to reveal God to the world. We cannot be sure; but we do know Matthew's Gospel was written primarily for a Jewish audience. Either way, Jesus tells his

disciples not to waste their time on unwelcoming people. The kingdom of God will be ushered in, not by force, but by the hospitality of those who welcome the new possibilities held out to them.

So what are WE to make of all this? How does it apply to us gathered in this church today, and in the world at large? Today's church is, like Judaism in Jesus' day, a mixed bag. Within our parishes and congregations, faith may be just a matter of habit, unaccompanied by expectations of new life; it may be a desperate longing for something to fill a spiritual void; or it may be a radical openness to new life, encouraged by ancient reminders that God is calling us, not into a dead past, but into a life-filled future.

When we gather as a Christian community, do we expect something will happen, or do we want nothing to happen that will shake us out of our comfort zones? Is God a domesticated deity called upon to do our bidding, or is God one who "comes to us as one unknown", to call us out of distrust and despair into a future filled with hope and promise?

What about the world? Does God call us to separate ourselves from the world, or are we being challenged to live the good news publicly? If we are to live the good news publicly, what can we expect? Many will close their doors, their ears, their minds and their hearts; but we cannot allow that to get in the way of our offering new life to them. If they send us packing, there are others who feel oppressed and hopeless, and long for comfort and support. Are we prepared to offer them a new vision and a new future; or do we simply see faith as a private affair between us and God? Jesus says the cost of discipleship may well mean having to give an account of ourselves before less than friendly people. Are we prepared for that? Do we

believe and trust that God will enable us, and give us the words we need without being anxious, defensive and hostile?

Today we are invited to gather and hear that living Word which sets us free and share in the new life Christ offers through his own life, death and resurrection; and then go in peace, to love and serve the Lord, and be the church in the world. What would happen if we really took all this to heart? It would be a different church and a different world!

May our laughter not be the cynical laughter of, "We have always done it this way" and "We've never done that before", but instead, may our laughter be the joyful laughter that comes when the unexpected happens, and by the amazing grace of God may we, as individuals, and as a church, give birth to the new life we have always longed for. For all this, thanks be to God! Alleluia!

AMEN.