

The Third Sunday of the Year

St. Paul was a remarkable person. Somehow he managed to have a very clear idea of what the Good News of the Kingdom of God was about. As a Jew he would know that in the work and life of Jesus the reign of God had begun and his powerful Spirit was at work in the world. That he could see it so clearly, because he knew and loved Jesus so much, meant that he could see very clearly when the Kingdom was not present and its values were not operating and that is what he tells us about today in that reading from his first letter to the Corinthians.

"Instead of disagreeing among yourselves be united in faith and practice," are Paul's words in his letter. He is passionate and moving towards anger because he has discovered that his beloved community in Corinth has divided itself into different factions and sects following different leaders. They have lost sight of their call to follow Christ and have become inward looking and afraid, erecting a barrier around themselves so that they can invent their own version of things.

Paul was remarkable in that he had imbibed exactly what the kingdom that Christ was proclaiming was about. On Friday evening, when he came to preach at the Unity Celebration at Wesley Methodist Church, Bishop Crispian, in an excellent homily, reminded us that our vision of the kingdom of Christ is rooted in the Trinity, in the life of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Paul knew that if the followers of Jesus were to be true and faithful to the work they had been given and the mission which they did in his name, then their lives had to reflect and become the living presence of the unity and harmony which is the feature of God's own life and love.

Being the living presence of God's own harmony and united strength was exactly what Jesus did in his work of teaching, forgiving and healing. Wherever he went he poured out the wholeness and new life which is the healing of fragmentation and brokenness. That is why Matthew talks about the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali which are part of the area where Jesus lived. Because they had been attacked and pillaged by the Assyrians, they became a symbol of brokenness and the unhappiness and dishonesty that follows such devastation. Naphtali and Zebulun were places filled with the darkness of division and chaos and Jesus was the light of truth bringing meaning and peace.

In his homily on Friday at Weeke, the Bishop was very strong in naming the reality that Christian faith is still persecuted both around the world and, in a subtle form, in our own land. It is almost that Christians can only just be tolerated because their existence makes little sense in our own modern times, when we think we have all the answers.

The sadness is that the Good News of the Kingdom that Jesus proclaims is about real human life and its fulfilment. Everyone wants to be fully alive and the truth is that the only way to it is in and through Jesus Christ.

All this is why our presence in society is so vital and why the call to follow Jesus brings that challenge to become the living and recognisable presence of a love that brings healing of division and fragmentation. It for us to proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom. How we do it will be different for each of us, but I would like to mention some characteristics of the Kingdom, of the work for Jesus.

The Good News of the Kingdom has something to say about intolerable situations which manifest division, need or suffering. We may not feel that we have something to say but we must have sharp enough vision to be able to identify it. Then the Lord will move us to make the right response.

The Good News of the Kingdom says that God cares for his people and that care must be visible in our lives. It is the Lord who gives us the people with whom we live and have contact and among them there will be those waiting to receive the love of one of the Lord's disciples.

The Good News of the Kingdom is always moving towards completion and our lives must point to the truth that this life is a journey and the end of it is death and resurrection with Christ. Only our belief in the life of the world to come can put this life and its experience in the proper perspective.

The Good News of the Kingdom speaks of the importance of community. So we are called to be a presence in all the communities of which we are members; a positive presence bringing the love and trust that Jesus teaches and proclaiming the importance of justice and peace. This is so because any community worthy of the name reflects the life of the Trinity and is therefore enhancing the lives of its members and bringing a deeper experience of human life.

Any mention of community on this particular Sunday, raises the question of Christian Unity. The existence of division between Christians, raises one of those intolerable situations about which I spoke earlier. In his homily on Friday, Bishop Crispian said that the time had come when warm relationships with those Christians from whom we are separated is only second best. Now we must take risks and work together so that our relationships with other Christians are based on those four vital elements which mark the Christian community in the Acts of the Apostles. The Bishop said that we must be daring in our efforts to be faithful together to the teaching of the Apostles, to the brother and sisterhood of the Christian community, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers. By entering wholeheartedly into such a process we will be faithful to our call to make present and visible the Good News of the Kingdom.