

St Francis / St. Mary's Holy Communion Sunday 7th June 2015

Trinity 1 / Proper 5 PRAYER I – 'Lord, Have Mercy'

1 Samuel 8:4-11,16-20

2 Corinthians 4:13-5:1

Mark 3:20-35

what's your favourite colour? I hope you like green, because we're stuck with that now till the end of October; five months of 'Ordinary Time' begin this Sunday, as we leave behind the thrills of Easter and Pentecost and move into, what? will it be a 'desert of dullness', or could it be a 'green and growing' time?

the other week, on retreat near Oxford, I was struck by the luxuriant fresh greenness of everything – trees in full leaf, sheep contentedly chewing the thick new grass; I thought, what is it that will help us to be 'green and growing' like that? how can we put down deep roots, and open ourselves to the sun and rain?

one of our key MAP priorities is to develop our prayer life, both individually and corporately; for it is surely out of prayer that our growth comes, both in knowledge of God and in service to his world – it is in prayer that we put down our roots and open ourselves to receive God's goodness

so, over the next couple of months, in the gaps between the other preachers, I want to keep coming back to this topic of prayer; as a framework I shall use this little book by Henri Nouwen, 'With Burning Hearts – A Meditation on the Eucharistic Life'

the book is based on the shape of the Communion service: Confession, Word, Sacrament and Sending Out; Nouwen connects each of these with aspects of our daily lives, so that our experience of worship is integrated with the rest of life; I want to focus especially on the way we pray, so that these four sections of the Eucharist can form a pattern for our prayers

we begin our service with The Gathering, the coming together and approach to God: the prayer of preparation, the summary of the law and the confession and absolution; why is that the right place to start, both in our worship, and in our prayers?

it means that we recognise reality; we come to worship and to pray, without pretending that things are other than they really are; *we begin with a cry for help, because we know our need of God*

Henri Nouwen connects these stages of the Eucharist with the story of the Emmaus Road in Luke 24, when two disciples meet the risen Jesus and gradually discover the truth of the resurrection

that story begins with sorrow and confusion of heart, as they explain to this 'stranger' how all they'd hoped for in Jesus had ended with his death on the cross two days before; they're experiencing a deep sense of loss – not just of Jesus himself, but also with him, of faith, hope and purpose for their lives; they are *mourning their losses*

when we come to worship and prayer, whether gathered here on a Sunday, at home on our own, or in a small group, we too should bring our losses before God and acknowledge and mourn for them

what burdens and losses do we bring to church with us today?

Nouwen writes: ‘nobody can escape the agonizing losses that are part of our everyday existence – the loss of our dreams; we had hoped for a life of generosity, service and self-sacrifice; we had planned to become forgiving, caring and always gentle people; but somehow – we aren’t even sure of what happened – we lost our dream; we became worrying, anxious people instead; it is this loss of spirit that is often hardest to acknowledge and most difficult to confess’

and along with a sense of our own failure and inadequacy there’s an awareness of the losses and sin of the wider world, ‘the world of prisoners, refugees, starving children, and the countless human beings living in constant fear; then the pain of our crying hearts connects us with the moaning and groaning of a suffering humanity’

what do we do with those losses, for ourselves and for others? do we relapse into resentment, cynicism and despair? is our prayer and worship just a whistling in the dark, pretending to believe in a loving and all-powerful God, against all the evidence? how do we begin to pray or worship with such a burden weighing us down?

it can be very hard, but Nouwen writes: ‘the Eucharist presents another option; it is the possibility to choose, not resentment, but gratitude; mourning our losses is the first step away from resentment and towards gratitude’

as we mourn our own losses and the suffering of the world around us, we need to find a way to move from our first instincts of blame or accusation, of self-pity or despair, towards gratitude, faith and hope

that is why we confess our sins and cry ‘Lord, have mercy!’ at the start of our worship and prayer – because it is there that we begin to see the possibility of forgiveness and renewal for that to become a reality, though, we need a companion, like those disciples on the Emmaus Road, someone who will unfold the bigger story for us, and help us to see where we fit into it – that’s something we’ll explore further next time, as we focus on hearing the Word

but to get us started, let’s take a look at today’s readings, to see what they may have to say to us:

in 1 Samuel 8 the people demand that Samuel appoint a king for them, ‘so that they can be like other nations’; they are in effect rejecting God himself from being their king, and looking for someone else to rest their hopes on, who will fight their battles for them; this did not end well! the whole OT is the story of what happens when we give up on God and look elsewhere for security

may our losses not lead us down that path, of giving up on God (as they so often do), but lead us to cry out all the more, ‘Lord, have mercy!’, because only in God do we find any firm ground for hope for us or the world we live in

in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul assures us that his sufferings, his ‘losses’ as an apostle do not negate the gospel; persecution and rejection are not signs that God doesn’t care or have the power to help; rather they are signs of the genuineness of his calling

Paul looks beyond success and failure in human terms: ‘This slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure’, for ‘Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day’

this is a perspective helps us not only to recognise and mourn our losses, but also to pray and worship with a hope, that is not wishful thinking but firmly rooted in God's promises in Mark 3, as Jesus sets out on his ministry, he meets opposition from his family, who think he's gone mad, and from the scribes, who call him demon-possessed; both are unable to discern the Holy Spirit in what Jesus is doing and saying

Jesus says that his true 'brother and sister and mother', are those who do the will of God; and the first step on that path is to discern and accept the Holy Spirit's judgement upon ourselves and upon the world, so that we recognise and mourn our losses, and cry, 'Lord, have mercy!'

then and only then are we ready to hear the voice of hope, that says, 'God so loved the world that he gave his only Son ...', the voice that calls us to hear his word, receive him in bread and wine, and go out in his name

more of that in future sermons ...

but this is where we start, in both worship and prayer:

we begin with a cry for help, because we know our need of God