

**Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2018**  
**Trinity 7 (B)**

**Liverpool Parish Church**

**OT: Amos 7.7-15**  
**NT: Ephesians 1.3-14**  
**G: Mark 6.14-29**

I don't know if you have noticed, but one of the common things we do as human beings is complaining and sharing frustrations. When I get together with colleagues at university, sooner or later, we will begin to share our various frustrations. So, rather than pretend that all is rosy, I normally suggest to my colleagues, it's better to acknowledge that feeling frustrated is very much routine.

I dare say that if you got a couple of members of this congregation the conversation wouldn't be that different. We Christians often can't see why other Christians are incapable to see that WE ARE RIGHT. We complain about priests, and priests complain about each other. In politics, we saw this week that some Brexiteers are frustrated with the Prime Minister and Remainers have long been just as frustrated. It is in a sense no surprise when we have well-intentioned public figures trying to solve twenty problems in one go.

This morning's readings provide us with types of Prophetic frustrations. We have Amos, not a particularly successful prophet, a herdsman, a breeder of sheep dressed in sycamore trees as he says; he protested the corruption of the rich and the need to stand for the poor. He, like Ezekiel and Hosea and others, remind us that prophets of the Old Testament were not simply blazing figures of 'strong and stable' public integrity. They were eccentrics who were despised. You might remember that Jonah ran away. Then, we move to our Gospel reading and we have the frustration

of John the Baptist with Herod Antipas. Like Amos, he announced oracles of woe upon Israel if she did not repent. John the Baptist was clearly a figure of some notoriety in the first century.

The prophetic activity of both Amos and the Baptist was, clearly, 'political', as well as 'religious'. The Gospels, as we heard this morning, give John's attack on Herod Antipas' marital arrangements as the reason for his arrest; a number of scholars believe that it was likely that there were wider reasons as well. To use the words of one of the scholars, 'Desert and Jordan, prophet and crowds, were always a volatile mix calling for immediate preventive strikes' (Crossan). Now, whilst Herod was reluctant to get rid of John the Baptist, Herodias, we were told, wanted to kill John the Baptist because 'she had a grudge against him'. Frustration is one thing. But, to have a grudge appears to lead to killing. We don't normally associate political unrest and killing with grudges. But, it's an interesting point to ponder.

Fifteen years ago I was sharing my frustration at the political situation in Israel/Palestine with a Dominican friend and scholar who was based at the *Ecole Biblique* in Jerusalem; we talked over a peaceful gin and tonic. He told me that the real problem in the Holy Land was that everybody have grudges in their hearts and by the mere fact of having grudges in our hearts we are perpetuating the state of conflict. (Nothing has changed since New Testament times. The actors have changed; but the plot remains the same). Few years later, I was a scholar in residence at the Tantur Ecumenical Research Institute in Jerusalem where I had the pleasure of reading a wonderful book by the late Rector of Tantur, Donald Nicholl. The book is a journal of his time in Jerusalem, titled *The Testing of Hearts: A Pilgrim's*

*Journal.* In it he records a conversation with a visiting Spanish scholar, who observes that many members of the community have come 'with heavy matter of unforgiveness and resentment lodged inside them from previous experience....it is precisely those who talk most about community building who block the flow, because they are the ones least aware of the matter of unforgiveness that they are carrying around with them, like a lead ball attached to their waists'.

These are strong statements; we may complain about all sorts of things at work, or in church; we may talk about community building; but one thing we need to ask: 'is it an excuse for addressing the inner weight of anger and grief?' Herodias' grudge puts her in a place where influence and hierarchy are a matter of unceasing struggle, as she asks for John the Baptist's head.

That is not where we want to be. If we wish to be 'strong and stable', it appears that this will require a daily discipline of mending and that is not a bad thing! This challenge is not a challenge for the government only (where daily discipline of mending seems to be the obvious at the moment). Funnily enough, this was a challenge for Jesus too, who, earlier in the same chapter of Mark 6, (which was last week's gospel), said he could not do any deed of power in Nazareth - frustrating. It sounds like nothing good can come out of Nazareth after all! But, the truth is that across the centuries, the human heart has found it difficult to accept Truth and goodness. There is no power that can force the human heart to heal – even God can't do that. We manage our fears with short-term 'toleration' of others at best. (Toleration here is about the inability to bear one another).

John the Baptist was the forerunner, we say, of Jesus, in his life and in his death. Jesus becomes the victim of political and religious grudges of his day. These are the sorts of grudges that we all carry. Hence we say, he died because of our 'sin'. New Testament research about the judicial execution of Jesus of Nazareth reflects a context in which the Judeans and the Romans were afraid of each other and were concerned that there would be an explosion of violence that would be destructive for all. The leaders looked for ways to avoid this and Jesus would have been a perfect scapegoat; they eliminated one common enemy.

All this sounds painfully contemporary. If no power can force our hearts, then how can our hearts change? They cannot change by force. They can change when they are broken by love. What we need is to pause for a moment and get our heads around the shocking fact that this Jesus, victim of religious and political grudges, is risen, not to revenge his killers but to change the terms of reference and to heal our unreasonable hearts if we take courage to face him. Because of him, we know that nothing matters to God more than our own health and joy even when we crucify him.

Therefore, the Church is not just a decorative luxury that some people thought was nice to add to the heritage culture on Sunday mornings. In the Ephesians text from this morning, Paul suggests that as we grow together in Christ, the whole purpose of God for creation is revealed from the beginning. When we face dreadful challenges, or hostility or suffering, we should not allow grudges, or grief to take over. We need to educate our feelings. We can best do that when we hear the voice of Love calling us to 'sit down and eat my meat', as the great sixteenth century Anglican poet,

George Herbert, put it. This is what we are attempting to do here at this Eucharist. When the Israelites were frustrated in Sinai, manna slipped behind their defenses to feed them. If we are going to be better than the people of Nazareth, and allow Christ to do mighty works among us, to heal and to touch, then we better sit still enough to let it happen as we come to receive him at this altar.

Fr Yazid Said