

Sunday 1st October 2023
Seventeenth Sunday after Trinity *also Harvest*

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Ezekiel 37.15-end

NT: I John 2.22-end

Depending on your point of view, social media is either one of the greatest things to happen in our contemporary world or one of the worst. It is often said of social media that it operates in echo chambers: one of the reasons that Remainers thought that the Brexit referendum would go their way is that they believed the narratives they saw, forgetting that they were only seeing narratives from people with whom they agreed. Of course this is true, but in fact social media can also give one an insight into people whose viewpoints you would never normally hear articulated. I don't need to be in my own echo chamber to scroll down the comments after a story on the Liverpool Echo Twitter feed and get a glimpse into a world – sometimes a very unpleasant world – which I would not otherwise see. Similarly, this week's attention-seeking outpouring of misogynistic hate by the former actor Laurence Fox on GB News, and the social media support which is evident for him, shows that there is another world which I imagine no one in this building this evening fully understands.

Creating division is a trope of those who feel threatened. From the playground bully to the aggressor state, pushing people apart reduces opposition and makes the aggressor seem stable and stronger. When you read some of the hatred which rattles around social media, you can normally spot the markers of people who feel disempowered in their own lives. The most vicious comments on Twitter normally come from people with only a handful of 'followers' and they sometimes use anonymous accounts as well. Their posts are often misogynistic, racist or homophobic, and they are looking for validation and endorsement in those views.

Our reading from Ezekiel this evening is about bringing an end to division. It is a fairly straightforward idea which would probably be endorsed by most religions and we do not need to spend a long time thinking about it. The prophet Ezekiel calls upon the different tribes to unite and live as Israel in their own land, and this is proclaimed as the will of God.

So let us take a step back again and think about division. The context of Ezekiel is that he was writing during the exile, when the people of Judah were in Babylon, and so this was a moment when the people were dispersed but needed to be as one in order to keep their identity as children of Israel. The prophet told them to write the names of the tribes on two sticks, and then “join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand.” This is typical prophet language, but this is not about religion so much as politics. Of course God wants harmony and he does not want conflict and division, but in the context of the exile this is about the survival of the identity and people of Israel.

The religious message is therefore not an expectation that the children of God should do anything different or special here, but rather that they should behave in the way which is most expedient for them. And is this not the message for all of us? The call of religion to be nice to other people is not some unusual requirement of religious folk, but rather it is a state of normality. In fact, this state of normality should be used to critique those people of faith – of any faith – who sow division and hatred. More significantly, the same weakness and insecurity which encourages people to create division is as evident in divisive religion as it is in the playground bully. Those churches which promote homophobia and misogyny are doing so from a position of fear, not strength.

Our second reading is focused on our relationship with Jesus, and how as his children we abide in him as he abides in us. There is also the intriguing line, “his anointing teaches you about all things.” I wonder whether this is a line which encourages division, because it seemingly creates two classes of people: those who know about all things and those who do not. But what does it mean to be anointed by him? At the heart of this is the confidence of knowing, and it is this confidence that the preachers of hate, or those who post on social media, claim for themselves. But the truth is that we do not know, and that the anointing by Jesus is almost the reverse, because it is an anointing into not knowing which teaches us all things. St Paul often picks up this theme when he talks about being a fool for Christ, and also his rather wonderful line, “Anyone who claims to know something does not yet have the necessary knowledge” (I Corinthians 8.2). We are taught all things in Christ, but do we know them?

This short reflection on our two Bible readings becomes a reflection on society and what we can claim to know. People of faith are not required to do anything or be anyone which is different from anyone

else, but we are given a glimpse of the truth through Jesus Christ. We cannot claim to know things which we do not know, but our readings tell us two things: firstly, that unity and peace are a state of normality, and that stasis is a deviation from the norm; and secondly, that it is in Christ that we are taught these things.

If you look at social media – and I do encourage you to do so, because we should all see with honesty the world in which we are living – then you will see hatred and division even more than you will see inclusive love (although this also exists in social media). Look at it and pity the marginalised and fearful who post such things, but stand with those they target, because they are usually the ones who represent the potential for human flourishing.

Fr Crispin Pailing