

Sunday 13 July 2008: Eighth Sunday after Trinity

This is the day that the Lord has made

Readings: Romans 8. 1-11; Matthew 13. 1-9, 18-23

Good Morning. I greet you in the name of the Risen and ever Triumphant Lord, and as well, I bring you greetings from the people of the Diocese of New York.

What a joy it is to be with you this morning and to see the remarkable transition that this hallowed place has made since that bitterly cold February ground breaking service, only a little more than two years ago.

It want to thank your Vicar, Nick Holtam not only for the opportunity to preach this morning, but also for the privilege of being allowed to play a small role in furthering the truly amazing work and witness of this great parish church.

What I find most compelling about what you have accomplished over these past years is that you have seen, and by your actions have demonstrated, the close connection between restoring the great beauty of this sacred place of worship, while, at the same time embracing, whole-heartedly, our Lord's mandate to care for those in need as though caring for Christ Himself. The worship of Almighty God, as Jesus has shown and taught us, is, and should always be seen to be, indissolubly linked to the care for God's beloved children. You, the people of St Martin's in-the-Fields, have done so much to make the power of that bond wonderfully clear.

It is, after all, all about hospitality, is it not? The unfathomable welcome of God's Love as revealed in Jesus over-whelms the imagination. We are invited into the very heart of the Divine Life. Remarkably, stunningly even, we are commissioned to welcome and encourage others to enter that Divine Life as well. God has indeed made us instruments of His peace. God has commissioned us to welcome the stranger, to help them discover for themselves that they are no strangers to God, but rather they are beloved members of God's creation, God's family, God's own Life.

But for each and all of us this dazzling insight presents us with a question: how do we appropriate this reality? How do we live the new life that is, by God's grace, *already* ours? How do we go about the business of living our daily lives as Christian people? And further, What are the marks, the signs that we, individually and corporately, are living that new life?

St Paul was obsessed with these two questions: the first of which he addressed in the passage we have just heard from his letter to the Romans.

How do we live as people of faith? In his early years Paul was convinced that the way to live as a faithful Jew was to adhere scrupulously to the Law, as laid out and so carefully dissected by the Pharisees, among whose number he counted himself.

Over the course of his life he learned two important things. The first was that he could not keep the Law perfectly. No matter how hard he tried, he just couldn't do it. Despite his most determined efforts his experience taught him that even when followed most assiduously the Law lacked the power to open him to the full wonder of God. Now, to be sure, the Law was good for some things. It helped one lead a moral, a civil life, but it failed in the one thing that was its true and ultimate purpose: it lacked the power to bring a person into union with God.

And then, quite despite himself, the second thing happened: he encountered Jesus on the Road to Damascus. And in that encounter he learned the second and by far the most important lesson of his life – union with God was not something he needed to earn, it was God's gift to be accepted.

It is this radical claim: God's gift of Himself is pure, unconditional, and free, that is so very difficult for us to absorb and accept. We human beings are so much more comfortable with rules that are neatly laid out before us. When everything is perfectly clear it is so much simpler. It is easy to know what we are accepting or rejecting, what we are embracing or fighting. So our natural tendency is to love law. And best of all is the chance to create law, law that we understand, control and from time to time manipulate. The very notion that our life, our very existence, does not depend upon rules or categories, but rather upon God's free gift, is extraordinarily unsettling. The prospect of building our own systems, categories, understandings and standards has such appeal. Do this and not that. No questions. No problems: just a nice neat order. The only problem is that that is not life as we know it. Nor is it life as Jesus lived it.

Life is messy and complicated. As followers of Jesus, we are not called to an ever more focused search for the perfect Law – we are called rather to look for, and learn to recognize and embrace the Spirit of the Living Christ in the midst of the world about us, and remarkably enough the world within ourselves. Since, to put it in personal terms, as St. Paul's wrote to the Romans, we are *not*

...in the flesh; (we) are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in (us).

The Law has no claim on us. It is powerless to save us. Therefore we need to avoid the seductive trap of recreating the law in a new and more winsome form. We need, constantly, to rely and to know ourselves to be relying upon, the living and active gift of God's Holy Spirit up-holding, embracing, and sustaining us.

This reality, and the knowledge of its fundamental claim on us, is, of course, no excuse for immorality. To say that there are no laws that can save us is not the same thing as saying that there is no Law at the heart of things. There surely is; as Jesus said in answer to the lawyers question as to which was the greatest commandment,

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." *Matthew 22.37-40*

To love one's neighbour as oneself is to accept and to attempt to live into the reality that we are, each and all, fundamentally linked with all of humanity. We don't live in pristine isolation one from another, but rather, as Jesus has shown us, we live in the most profound and intimate communion.

But what makes us think that we are, in fact, living this boundless life as God means for us to live it? How do we know if we are living that promised Life, rather than simply indulging our own fancies?

Jesus' Parable of the Sower addressed one dimension of that exact question. The central message of the parable appears to have been two-fold. He was alerting His followers to the

many challenges that they lay before them. And, as well, he was accounting for the varied and various receptions which His message of Good News would and had received. But the familiar conclusion of the Parable says it all,

Other seeds fell on good soil and brought forth grain, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. *Matthew 13:8*

The fruit of the Resurrected Life is just that; it is fruitful. It is productive: thirty, sixty and hundredfold.

But of exactly what is it productive? Is it size? Is it numbers? Is it wealth? Is it orderliness? Or for that matter is it even about being right?

Once again St. Paul is instructive. As he writes to the Galatians,
.... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

These then are the signs, the fruit of the Spirit, that should mark our lives as individuals and as the gathered community: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the signs that we should work to cultivate. And when seeking guidance through the thorny tangle that so threaten to strangle us; these are the signs that we should look to for help to find our way.

We, in our day, have been commissioned to carry the tender but infinitely resilient message of God's abiding love to this parched and hungry world. Some would say that these are especially difficult days. I say that these are the days that God has given us. Let us, with sober hearts, rejoice that they are ours. Let us embrace these days as our days. Let us pray God the grace and courage to live them with lives so richly marked by the fruit of that new life that others may find in us the hope and the assurance that it is their destiny, as well as our own, to live embraced in the arms of God's love: today, tomorrow, and unto the ages of ages.