

Live by the Spirit

Canon Bill Goodes

Third Sunday after Pentecost – II Kings 2:1-2, 6-14, Psalm 77:1-2, 10-20, Galatians 5:1,13 – 25, Luke 9:51 – 62

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.” (Galatians 5:16)

For something like the next 20 weeks, we will be observing the so-called “Sundays after Pentecost”, which we began last week. This sequence will be interrupted only by the Church’s Dedication Festival, and the month of the Season of Creation. During these weeks, we follow three independent series of readings: the first will be the ones from the Old Testament (properly now referred to as “the Hebrew scriptures”), and these will focus on the work of the prophets – this series began last week with the prophet Elijah, and today introduces his successor, Elisha. The Psalm that is set each Sunday is meant to pick up some part of the theme of the first reading. Today’s is a lament in which the Psalmist comes to question what God is up to making him suffer like he is – but then he goes on to a confident recital of God’s past actions.

The Gospel readings this year are mainly from the Gospel of Luke and we come today to a turning point in the story that that Gospel portrays of Jesus’ ministry – the point in his ministry where he “sets his face to go to Jerusalem”. John’s Gospel has Jesus in Jerusalem on a number of occasions before his final time there, but the other three see his move from Galilee to Jerusalem as something that only happens once – as the time of Jesus’ death approaches. These writers are not so much interested in a kind of Google Timeline, which tracks Jesus’ movements in diary form: rather they construct their telling of the story in a way that helps the reader to see the

logic of Jesus' ministry, rather than its calendar.

It is interesting, too, to see that Luke places this 'turning to Jerusalem' rather earlier in the story than do Matthew and Mark. The first three chapters in Luke are taken up with the birth stories of Jesus and John Baptist, and then Jesus' Baptism and Testing. This rite of commissioning and direction-setting leads to a confident, popular ministry of healing, exorcising, teaching, feeding in the region of Galilee. He is assisted in this ministry by his twelve apostles. It is when they return from their mission of preaching the kingdom that Jesus reaches the turning point in his ministry in the crucial events recorded in chapter 9 – in that chapter we have the story where Peter acknowledges Jesus as Son of God, and then Jesus takes Peter, James and John to a mountain where he is transfigured in their sight. And now, he "sets his face to go to Jerusalem", because "the days drew near for him to be taken up". Over the next Sundays we will follow this journey, with stories of success and threat, until, ten chapters later, Jesus enters Jerusalem and the story of Holy Week begins. As Luke tells the story, throughout this period "his face is set towards Jerusalem", and what follows his entry into Jerusalem cannot be avoided: it is who Jesus *is!*

The other series of readings is from the letters of Paul – beginning with the earliest of them, the letter to the Galatians. Each of these letters tries to address particular situations in the life of the various congregations. They do so by focussing on the person of Jesus, and on the appropriate way of life for followers of Jesus. Today's reading is a particularly significant one in describing that way of life – it lists the results of living a life only concerned with what our physical instincts and desires direct, and contrasts that with the fruits of living "in the Spirit".

One of the principal situations that Paul addresses in this letter is that some people are telling the Galatian Christians

they must follow the Jewish Law – and Paul’s experience of that Law is that it imposes a virtual slavery on people: he contrasts this experience with the gift of freedom which life in Jesus brings: “For freedom Christ has set us free...do not submit again to a yoke of slavery!” today’s reading began. However, this very freedom, fundamental to the life in Christ, carries with it a danger: is the Christian disciple so “free” that there are no boundaries to the disciple’s behaviour? “you were called to freedom...only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence”.

To make quite clear what he means, Paul then goes on to contrast “gratifying the desires of the flesh” with “living by the Spirit”. Now this contrast between “flesh” and “spirit” raises some questions for us, because we have grown up being told that “flesh is good” – our bodies are beautiful, objects of delight, God-given, to be cherished and valued. Hating the body is thought of as “Victorian”, and out of touch with who we really are. The Greek word used for flesh is *sarx*, which comes into English in words like “sarcoma” or “sarcophagus”, and in Latin this becomes “*carnis*”, which gives rise in English to both “carnal” and “incarnation” – perhaps giving an idea of just how revolutionary Christ’s coming “in the flesh” really is!

When I am guiding school-children on a tour of the Cathedral, I often ask them to look at the outside of the building, and ask them which way it points. While some would say immediately “it points to heaven”, I have to try to steer away from that crude geography, and talk of “higher things” or “pointing away from those concerns that are only to be found in the earthly”. I don’t know how much that takes root in their understandings, but it is the same contrast that Paul is addressing. For Paul here is using the term “flesh” in the sense of a direction of life governed only by carnal desires, those desires that deal only with the satisfaction of *my* wants – with no relation to other people or to God.

When we live “according to the flesh”, he says, it results in fifteen types of anti-social and destructive behaviours – these are the obvious ones, and there are others like them. When we live by the Spirit, are guided by the Spirit, instead we show the fruits of “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”

This list of “fruits” comes with its challenge to our personal ways of working with one another: do we always demonstrate these in our relationships in family, neighbourhood, political life, or even in our world-wide considerations? But what about our Church relationships? I am afraid that too often we see congregations demonstrating the “works of the flesh” that Paul is talking about – things like “enmities, strife, quarrels, dissensions, factions”. Wouldn’t it be wonderful if, in researching the story of this Parish, this Diocese, the Anglican Communion, historians were able to look at our story as demonstrating “kindness, generosity, love, self-control” I don’t know why the compilers of our lectionary left out the final verse of this chapter – perhaps it was too close to the bone even then: it says “Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another”!

“Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.”