

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 1st September 2019
Trinity 11 YrC Proper 17

Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.

Imagine if you will a theological hot house, set in the middle of the Oxfordshire countryside. No bus had served the area for over 25 years and the only means of escape would be the college car, one car between 40 odd students (the others being older or married and thereby having their own cars). Life could get pretty tetchy and difficult. Arguments and rows broke out on occasion on what now we would see as the silliest of things; length of cotta, the pause in the recitation of the psalm, the inclusion or not of the bracketed verses in the ASB Psalter.

One day a discussion broke out about the college Christmas dinner. Now college's, as you know, break up before the Christmas season begins. We all want to get home before the commencement of the holiday season so term would end around the beginning of December, this was Oxford after all. The date of the college Christmas dinner was announced; 29th November and a riot ensued. How on earth could we celebrate Christmas, with a college Christmas dinner when the season of Advent just arrived?

Now there is an argument about keeping the churches season appropriately. After all they tell the story of Jesus and the way of salvation on an annual cycle. Once you begin to drop one thing then others become less relevant. So I saw the point but the argument became silly (it was the end of a busy term). Students were going to boycott the dinner, others were going to hold a prayer meeting, letters were written to the Bishop and College Principle, others were going to do something else. It got silly. And then the bubble was burst by a good friend who found a 9th century saint; Radboud of Utrecht, whose feast day fell on the date for the college dinner. Not only did this allow the argument to abate, it was a jolly little dig at how silly we had all been. Radboud is no saint of real note. He has a profile amongst Catholic scientists in the Netherlands, but is of minor status or pretty unremarkable. So to have a college dinner in his name was in itself silly.

The event went down in college history and for many years we didn't have a Christmas dinner but a dinner dedicated to St Radboud of Utrecht in homage to how daft students could be in such an enclosed hot house.

We have been reflecting for the past few weeks on the nature and place of faith in our lives. We've thought about the need to constantly put God at the centre of all things. We have reflected on how faith is evidenced through our daily lives and the way we make decisions. What we have been doing is looking at a rounded picture of what the life of faith means; about our relationship to God. Our readings today encourage us to look outwards and reflect on how our faith encourages us towards healthy and meaningful relationships with people.

Saints are holy people, noted in the life of the church for their faithfulness and godliness. How could that be if their life and relationship with others didn't evidence this? How could someone like Radboud be considered a saint if it were not for the witness and testimony of others who received his ministrations. The point of today's readings is this outworking of our lively, living faith amongst our neighbours, amongst the community within which we live and work, amongst our friends and family.

The writer of Ecclesiasticus is warning us of the sin of pride. Pride, like many sins is an abuse of others. To be prideful is to deny others, to put them down, to under value them and thereby is an anathema to those who live in faith. Yet it is something to be on our guard for as it is an easy trap to fall into. It is a negative relationship that does not bring glory to God.

Our passage from Hebrews opens with a request, "Let mutual love continue". Love is the basis of creative, constructive and positive relationships. Through love, hospitality and care for the stranger, comes wholeness for us as the one who offers, and healing to those who receive. In love we honour others and their relationships with each other. We build others up and strengthen them in their desire to live full and active lives. Throughout all these new and living engagements, whilst love abounds, so it is to God that we witness and it is God's praise we raise.

Jesus' parable may be seen as being about pride. It is more about love. When we come into the presence of others, if we do so in love we have no expectations. We don't expect to find honour or high place. We are just happy to be with them and celebrating with them. So when we are offered something better it is offered purely out of mutual love and respect rather the duty and expectation. How more wonderful to receive a bouquet of flowers as a thank you than to get all screwed up because we expected the flowers that were never offered. And yet we do. Because our expectations, our pride our selfishness or self-image is not praised by others or is inappropriately praised by others or praised out of duty, then they are all valueless. To receive thanks unlooked for and genuinely offered is to receive praise for good works, for love offered. In the case of a Christian it is then God who is praised and thanked, because it is in God that we have completed these tasks with joy.

Our task, our place in this world is to give praise and glory to God. We can only do this if God is at the centre of our lives; the pressures of the world are constantly trying to push God out. It is through prayer, the study of scripture and gathering for fellowship and worship that we gain the skills and powers to keep God centred lives; lives that allow us to love God and love our neighbour. By this then can we live the life of faith and walk humbly with our Lord.