

Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Year C - 4/8/2019

Hosea 11:1-11
Psalm 107:1-9,43
Colossians 3:1-11
Luke 12:13-21

In the name of the Trinity; Creator, Redeemer, and Life-Giver...

One of our Archbishop's favourite things to talk about, other than his propensity to say "okey-dokey", a phrase he uses quite often, is to talk about discipleship. It's a key thing for him - the fact that each one of us, no matter where we might see ourselves in our journey of faith, is actually called to be a disciple - to listen to Christ, to follow Christ, and to talk about Christ.

It's a theme that is central to the Diocesan Vision 2022 document, where the wording used is that "we will be a Diocese of flourishing Anglican communities, whose members are confident and competent to live as disciples of Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit."

Here at St. Andrew's we are about to embark on an intentional journey which I hope will help us answer the question of "how will we be part of this vision?" The end result of this process might well be a document that we call a Mission Action Plan - but from my perspective that's not the important thing.

For me, the opportunity is before us to reflect on our personal and communal call to discipleship; what we do well in this area and what we could do better or differently - so that we might become a flourishing community, and feel confident and competent in our discipleship.

It's not an easy time to be a disciple - that's assuming there ever *has*, in the history of Christianity, been an easy time. But we do live in a time and in an age where it's much easier to *not* be a disciple, I suspect. It's a time where resistance to organized religion, certainly, is at an all time high.

And yet it is also a time when what is happening around us at a local and global level leaves us broken-hearted; where the levels of injustice and violence and terror have us crying out “How long, O Lord, how long?”

This is a cry which not only has its roots in the pages of Scripture right from the beginning of creation, but is echoed today in so many places in the world, as faithful Christians (and indeed faithful Muslims and Jews also) utter the same cry...

This is why, for me this week, it was not the parable of Christ which found root in me, although God knows just how much this world also needs to hear Jesus’ words of correction against our propensity to accumulate wealth at a staggering pace.

Nor was it the Epistle reading that appealed to me, as much as the author of the letter to the Colossians emphasizes the importance of looking to things of heaven, rather than things of earth - again, a valid message for us at this time.

Rather, it was the words of the Prophet which resonated with me this week. Into this space in which we find ourselves - this difficult time in which we live - we hear today words from the Prophet, Hosea. And I think that if ever we needed to pay heed to Prophetic words and Prophetic promises the time is now.

Those who are tempted to believe that the Old Testament is concerned primarily with judgment (while the New Testament is about grace) must surely be stripped of such illusions by today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures. There is no more poignant portrayal of the agony of God, who is torn between the demands of judgment and of grace. The images of both parent and spouse are used to emphasize the love of God, a love that is continually spurned by a sinful people.

“it was I who taught Ephraim to walk”, says Hosea, “I took them up in my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them.” (Hos. 11:3-4)

Hosea, we hear today, agonized over the fate of his nation and suffered enormous pain as he described Israel's destructive waywardness before God. As we read the text, it becomes clear that Hosea's pain is nothing other than the pain of God.

Yet the God of Israel cannot come to the point of destroying finally and irredeemably, for such a step would violate God's essential nature. When justice and grace are weighed in God's balances, grace always prevails.

Our reading today emphasizes the helplessness of the beloved. If Yahweh had not loved Israel and nurtured it, Israel would not even have survived. Yet the tragic irony is that "The more I called them, the more they went from me." (Hos.11:2)

How much, as we hear the terrible and destructive events of the world around us today, does this same idea ring true - "The more I called them, the more they went from me". It simply cannot be true, I think, that God desires anything of what we see around us - this cannot be God's Will - for this is not the God I know and understand and have experienced in my own life.

Rather, I know a God who does call - gently, yet persistently - to return to God's ways. To experience again the perfect freedom that Paul speaks of to the Colossians. To understand the Grace so epitomized in the person of Jesus Christ.

Indeed, the suffering God of Hosea anticipates nothing less than the suffering Christ of Gethsemane and of Calvary's cross. And this suffering of non-violence is precisely what we commemorate and enact here in the Eucharist.

This is why we find ourselves today, despite the brokenness of life, astonished by the vastness of God's love. "For we inhabit a world brought into existence by a word we are unable to speak, redeemed by a sacrifice we are unable to make, and transformed by a resurrection we are unable to imagine." (Fr. Matthew Anstey.)

Hosea speaks for God to a world of brokenness which had gone astray; a people who had wandered from God, and perhaps deserved nothing less than the wrath of God.

Instead, we see in Hosea, how God suffered along with the people, and that God sought to draw them back to her breast.

We live today in a world that needs to hear the same words - the same message. A world yearning to hear and feel all the way down into its bones, that final life-giving word of judgment awaiting us all: "You are my people and I am your God."

As disciples of Christ, our call is on the one hand, simple, yet on the other, profoundly difficult. It is to proclaim to a broken and hurting world that there is another way to live - that to respond to violence with violence is not the way; that harsh words do not deserve harsh words in response. Rather, we are to model our lives on God's way - the way of mercy and grace.

One of the strengths of this community of faith is the love and support that its members experience. How can we draw more people to experience this same love and support by the strength and conviction of our lives? How can we become more confident and competent in our discipleship? How can we communicate to the world the good news of Jesus Christ?

Let us together walk the way of Christ. Let us explore and search and be open to the leading of God's Spirit in this process - for God says: "you are my people, and I am your God..."

In the name of Christ. Amen.