

NOTES FOR SERMON OR HOMILY CW OUTLINE

8th September 2019

"FORM AND FLOURISH - TO RE-FORM"

Introduction

Jesus-shaped communities are learning communities as we grow in our understandings of life together, mission, service and daily discipleship. The Archbishop of Canterbury's initiative to annually draw a group of young people to live residentially in Lambeth Palace as the Community of St. Anselm (www.stanselm.org.uk) helps us understand that the Christian life is so much more than Sunday congregations. It is often said that churches need to be 'schools of prayer', drawing lessons from church history. We know how our own discipleship is enriched by shared Christian activities.

We draw our biblical reflection from a coherent set of vibrant readings. We consider how they help our faith to take shape and flourish, enabling our Christian lives, individually and corporately, to be reformed.

The Hebrew scriptures*

Have you ever watched a potter at work, how they rest their elbows firmly on the sides of their wheel-bed, allowing their hands together to become a third point of a triangle which moulds and shapes the clay into its final form? If something goes awry, the potter reworks the lump afresh into its new form. This is what Jeremiah is explaining in everyday terms (then), using the potter's actions to illustrate the word of God for all God's people: '...thus says the Lord: Look, I am a potter shaping evil against you and devising a plan against you. Turn now, all of you from your evil way, and amend your ways and doings.'

Psalms 139, written centuries before Jeremiah, helps re-affirm the constancy of God and that divine hand upon our lives. God is always present – and it is God who gives the freedom of thought to even believe that we can escape the divine purpose for humanity. That wonderful Celtic hymn, St. Patrick's Breastplate with its 'Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ within me' refrain tells us to acknowledge the form of God in our lives before we can flourish as in verses 1-6. The second chosen part of this Psalm reminds us of our personal formation within God's creation, enabling us to be moulded in God's image, just as a potter moulds clay.

The apostolic writings...

Firstly, **Philemon** is a church leader who receives Paul's shortest letter about the single issue of Onesimus, a runaway slave. Philemon could have Onesimus executed or branded on the face but Paul trusts in Christian brotherhood to send Onesimus back with this letter. The form of human justice then was brutal but Paul pleads to Philemon for the newly-converted Onesimus to be received back "as a brother (Christian)". Such an example will give life and a new relationship to both Philemon and Onesimus, enabling such Gospel witness to flourish and for those who encounter such an example to re-form their thinking about the nature and life of the Jesus shaped community.

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Secondly, the **gospel of Luke** challenges us about the everyday cost of discipleship. Jesus uses some hard-hitting examples. All of us are called to weigh up whether we can and will pay the price of becoming Jesus' disciples. Those with power in today's world can easily understand weighing up the costs of completing what we plan to build or whether we can win the campaign or battle we are embarking upon. Failing to plan means we can easily plan to fail – that is so true of our church life as well – all this can overwhelm us from the need to focus upon our discipleship and the reign of God. Understanding this can help us realise why Jesus challenges us about how our families and their demands can also prevent us from living out the 'reign of God'. How many of our churches are truly Jesus-shaped communities when the lonely, isolated, single or elderly are excluded from our 'life together' by an emphasis on doing things with the family. Whatever the cost, Jesus calls us to take up our cross and follow him.

Conclusion

The form and shape of our lives is a gift of God's creation. It is the nurture of God's new Jesus-shaped community which enables us to flourish by the power of the Spirit. Only then can we find that our lives and discipleship are being re-formed daily by the 'reign of God', as we grow together in our understandings of life together, mission, service and daily discipleship. We learn from one another through the life of the Spirit-led community, so letting God's grace re-form our lives of faith.

★ *The chosen Roman Catholic alternative readings from*

The Hebrew scriptures

The poetic simplicity of the Jerusalem Bible's translation of Wisdom, chapter 9, recounts the difference between those who recognise God's purpose for our flourishing and those who rely on the unsure 'reasoning of mortals'. Those who have chosen God's way know they cannot comprehend the mind of God and therefore must enable the Spirit of Wisdom to overtake the human form of our creation, enabling God to re-form and re-shape our very being, so that we flourish in God's ways. Just like the later examples from Luke's Gospel, we can choose to be weighed down by earthly things, which obliterate the heavenly purpose and our growth in the life of God.

The three short extracts from the set Psalm 89 affirm both God's creation and the re-creation (or re-forming) of all things, including God's people. Firstly God and his people are set (formed) into a covenant relationship, in which God's eternal faithfulness is acknowledged. Secondly the divine values of righteousness, justice, love and faithfulness are affirmed by what flourishes in the created order. Finally, God is proclaimed as the One who re-forms us. Catholic faith affirms a God who 'makes all things new'; as Pope Francis said "...eternal life will be a shared experience of awe, in which each creature, resplendently transfigured, will take its rightful place..." (*Laudato Si'*, 243).

