

Epiphany 7
20/02/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Leviticus 19:1 – 2, 9 - 18

Psalm 119:33 - 36

1 Corinthians 3:10 – 11, 16 - 23

Matthew 5:38 - 48

You are God's Temple: be holy, be perfect

In the reading from Corinthians Paul introduces a building metaphor to describe the church, which replaces an agricultural metaphor. In the verse before our reading he described the Corinthian congregation as “God’s field” [1 Cor 3:9] in which he planted the seed of the Gospel. He immediately introduced another metaphor: you are “God’s building”. As we heard today he went on to say he was the “skilled master builder” who laid the foundation of the congregation upon which his successor Apollos built. Paul develops the metaphor: *Do you not know you are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you ... God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple* [1 Cor. 3:16]. The community meeting in Christ’s name at Corinth is “God’s temple” a living building, a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. Since God and God’s Spirit are holy, the community is holy and share the life of God.

These are impressive, even extraordinary claims. In my experience many people sitting in church are reluctant to even think of themselves as Christians, let alone as holy, or a dwelling place for the Holy Spirit. But Paul’s words are part of a large collection of New Testament metaphors used to describe the church. All of them are communally focussed, all of them by implication animated by the indwelling power or Spirit of God and therefore holy. A few of the metaphors are: the body of Christ, the people of God, the bride of Christ, the saints of God.

The word holy, applied to ourselves, gives us problems because we tend to hear it as implying some sort of moral or religious superiority, the product of flawless virtuous living. These thoughts no doubt arise for some when they hear texts like Leviticus 19:2 “*You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy*”. We could expect the same reaction to the last verse of the Gospel for today: “*Be perfect therefore as your heavenly Father is perfect*” [Matt 5:48]. What makes it seem worse is that both seek to offer guidance from the law about what is acceptable conduct in a community of faith. How does that help?

The Leviticus reading comes from an extensive Holiness Code, [Chapters 17 – 26] which spells out for priests and people the ways in which worship of God is meant to transform our thoughts and actions in daily life. The God of Israel is “the Lord” and not a force to be harnessed or a commodity to be traded. God is holy, which means wholly other - “distinctive from the ordinary” – and is to be honoured in carefully directed worship. Holiness is not a quality we possess, it is something that accrues to us because of the relationship we have with the holy God who has chosen to have a relationship with us. The Holiness code spells out how this relationship is meant to transform all our living. The “shape” of the holiness of the people of God takes its cue from the holiness of God. Holiness in heaven is enacted as justice on earth: if you are going to love God who has already shown love to you, then it follows that you learn to love your neighbour as yourself.

Perhaps it is now possible to see that holiness is not some sort of pious “holier than thou” attitude we are called to develop. Holiness really describes a way of life that flows from “walking with God”. Leviticus, and other parts of the bible spell this out according to specific matters, but in every case, the meaning is: because God is like this, it has the following implications for your life together. To refuse to live like this is defiling of the faith you have received. Israel did not find such regulations burdensome. They were part of the law of the Lord, the Torah that was understood as an enlightening and sustaining gift. “*The law of the lord is prefect, reviving the soul*” [Ps 19:7]. The law was not a legalism, but instruction revealed to the people that gave them the privilege of responding to the Creator, who had willed to enter into relationship with them.

The Gospel reading shows how the law translates into practice in the radically new era inaugurated by Jesus who, on Matthew’s account, stressed that he came to fulfil the law not to abolish it. He pushes some values further, and reverses others. It is not just a case of loving your neighbour: it is a case of seeing that the question “Who is my neighbour” includes those who are antagonistic towards us. The law gave to an injured party the right to retaliate up to the equal level of the damage done, but Jesus says: turn the other cheek; do good to those who treat you badly. This pronouncement is not reasonable or expedient and we could ask: “Has Jesus improved the law?” What he actually did was give the law a radical new twist, based on the vision a world that understood God’s character as suffering love. He lived it. He loved his enemies. He turned the other cheek. The sign of the cross appears for us once more here. The sign of God’s unconditional suffering love offered to all becomes the lens through which we are to understand God’s gifts of peace and justice. What is meant by holiness reaches new heights here but Jesus does not use the word. He says: “be perfect ... as your heavenly Father in perfect”.

The use of perfect in place of holy does not get us out of trouble. The problem is that while “perfect” is a word with many forms and nuances of meaning, in the church it has a history of standing for “sinlessness” or moral flawlessness, which most of the Christian tradition regards as impossible for humans to achieve. Is Jesus urging us to make our quest that of seeking moral flawlessness? No! He challenges us to let our behaviour be founded on that of God who, in the cross as in the life of Jesus, is seen to love without distinction. If we are going to walk with God as Jesus did, then we are called to live by love that is not partial. That is what it means to live a perfect life. That is what it means to translate justice and peace according to the sign of the cross. In Paul’s language that is what it means to be “complete” or “mature” is to live by the perfect folly of God’s love offering to all people the undistinguishing regard we have received from God.

When Paul wrote to Corinth, he did not mention the law, but the people had become defiled by competitiveness and were divided into cliques. The community was in danger of fracturing. Paul tried to pull them back to the foundation he laid for them in their faith. They were God’s building, and he had worked to make them a living temple of God’s love. He directed them back to the foundation of the cross of Christ and what that meant for their life together. A return to the source would puncture pride and self-seeking allow them to transcend their differences and re-engage their community with the love of God.

The church we belong to is founded on the same reality: the wisdom and love and justice of God expressed in the Cross is all in the basis of Union. If we try to depart from that foundation and develop a new faith, we are no longer a Christian church. As a community we are called to strive to live always in this reality and let it shape our common life.

St Francis of Assisi sent his brothers out into the world saying: “Preach the Gospel. Use words if you have to.” These days people may not be able to grasp the meaning of our words. But if we grapple with what it means to express them in the worship and service that stands at the centre of our life together, we will be fulfilling what it means to be holy and perfect. A community - a living temple – standing on the undistinguishing love of God. By the power of the Holy Spirit others may come to know that love too.
