

Living in the light
Kingham 28/6/2009

Readings: Romans 12:9-21 & 14:13-19; Hebrews 12:12-24

Introduction

I wonder what comes to your mind if I say the word ‘church’?

It’s been said that the Church of England is full of old women, of both sexes and all ages!

Is that what comes to mind?

Or is it the smell of decay?

Of days long gone, when people believed stuff to help with their torrid lives, or simply because they knew no better?

Or is it more like the picture painted in the letter to the Hebrews which Susie read to us?

“Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God... thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. ... the spirits of righteous men made perfect, [and] Jesus the mediator of a new covenant...”

Because that's the reality!

There are something like 2,000 million Christians today.

I know that living in the Cotswolds, 50 seems a crowd and 3 cars in a line is a traffic jam!

But 2 billion people trusting Jesus for their forgiveness...

... following Jesus’ example for how to live their lives...

... looking forward to spending eternity with him!

The Prayer Book calls it ‘the church militant here on earth’.

But that's still only part of the story.

There are countless millions who’ve died trusting in Christ.

Probably lots whom you have known.

Led by huge numbers of angels in a joyful assembly.

And yet, so often, our experience of the local church falls so far short of that, doesn't it?

Well, that’s what this part of Scripture addresses.

What gets in the way of us here being like Hebrews 12?

Don't give in to despondency v12f

The first thing, v12-13, is not to give in to despondency.

“Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees! ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.”

Feeble arms and weak knees were familiar images for despondency.

We’re in Victor Meldrew land here in Hebrews!

These aren't disabled physically, but emotionally and spiritually weak and drained.

Some of these Jewish Christians were getting despondent, picked on by their neighbours, for following a dead carpenter.

They were a small group amongst large numbers of unbelievers, who seemed to be doing fine without Jesus.

And so, many were tempted to give up on their faith.

The despondency virus was spreading among them faster than Swine Flu.

And the apostle says ‘Stop it!’

I heard this week of an elderly Christian who had these words written in the front of her Bible: ‘I absolutely refuse to gratify the devil by being downhearted.’

I can think of quite a few elderly Christians here who that might have been, but it wasn't here.

It’s so easy to concentrate on the difficulties and low numbers of being church in small rural villages.

Any fool can do that and Satan rubs his hands in glee when you and I do.

I will be the first to admit I often do!

And those who are ‘disabled’, in v13 terms, who are feeling downhearted about how many folk in our villages never go near the gospel, are weakened still further.

By my negative thinking and speaking.

No, he says, focus on the good things that God is doing to build his church here and throughout the Cotswolds.

There is a functioning church here, despite so many faithful Christians having died in the past few years, and you are paying for a full time vicar and youth worker.

There is a thriving children’s and youth work happening, with young people becoming Christians and being encouraged to keep growing in their faith.

Around 60 men and women, many not yet Christians, attend the monthly breakfasts.

There are 40-50 adults meeting each and every week to study the Bible in homes.

Don't be despondent, Jesus is building his church.

And don't encourage others to feel that way either.

Strengthen your and each other’s feeble arms and weak knees to work for the advancement of the Kingdom here.

‘I absolutely refuse to gratify the devil by being downhearted.’

Build and maintain harmony

Next, v14, he tells us to both build and maintain peace.

“Make every effort to live in peace with all men...”

And boy oh boy, isn't that hard at times!

‘If only everybody else in the church was like me!’

People are often selfish and abrasive, we all know that, we watched The Apprentice!

But Christians shouldn't be, because Jesus never was.

Trouble is, it’s not easy to know when I'm being like that.

Do people often seem to take offence at you, for no reason?

Of course, it might be that all of them being over sensitive.

But then again, it might not.

So if you seem to leave angry and hurt people in your wake, why not ask a Christian friend to keep an eye on you.

To gently point out when you act abrasively towards others.

Then you can pray about it and work on changing.

Our author doesn't say much more here, but elsewhere in Romans chapters 12 & 14, Margaret read us lots of tips about how to build and maintain peace amongst us.

So Paul says in Romans 12: "Bless those who persecute you... and do not curse... Do not repay anyone evil for evil... but overcome evil with good."

When someone gives you a hard time, behind your back or to your face, do you work and pray for their blessing?

For peace between you?

Or do you do what any non-Christian might, plan revenge?

I may be pointing a finger at you, but three are pointing back at me, and I'm very aware of that.

Paul continues: "If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."

And in Romans 14, Margaret read: "let's stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in your brother's way... Let's therefore make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification."

What are you doing to build peace and mutual edification, growth in Christian maturity, here in our church family?

Jesus said "By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." John 13:35

Numbers aren't what church is about, but a loving community at peace with itself is.

What are you doing to make our church family here look and feel like that to insiders and outsiders alike?

Be holy

But our writer doesn't just talk of peace in v14, he continues "and be holy; without holiness no-one will see the Lord."

Remember Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount?

"Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God."

Paul wrote to the Thessalonians: "God did not call us to be impure, but to live a holy life." 1 Thessalonians 4:7

And in Romans 6 he wrote: "Just as you used to offer the parts of your body in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now offer them in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness." v19

If you have put your trust in Jesus' death for your sin, then God has promised to treat you as if you were as morally pure and perfect as Jesus himself is.

That's called 'justification', and it's the core of the gospel!

But then the task of the Holy Spirit and the Christian begins.

To start becoming more like Jesus, so that the gulf between what I am like and how God treats me, narrows.

That's why we need to keep reading our Bibles, discussing it in home groups, and being taught it in Church.

How will you become more like God in your character and thinking, if you don't get to know him better?

You can't become more like someone you don't know!

So, let's just imagine that I find it hard to be kind and selfless towards others when I've had a really hard day.

And the phone or doorbell goes once again!

And I read in the Bible of Jesus, exhausted from days of preaching and healing huge crowds.

He staggers off to have some rest alone with his disciples in a quiet place, the other side of the lake.

And as soon as he gets there, the crowds all turn up again!

What does Jesus do then, and why does he do it? Mark 6v31-34

If, hypothetically speaking, I were struggling like I said, then I will be challenged by Jesus' selfless attitude, and particularly the reason for it.

So I'll try to think more the way Jesus does about others.

And I'll pray hard that the Holy Spirit will give me the strength and wisdom to take that on board and change.

"be holy [like Jesus]; without holiness no-one will see the Lord."

Take responsibility for spiritual life

And his final challenge I've called 'Prioritise spiritual things'.

v15: "See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many."

And by way of example, he says don't make the same mistake Esau made.

You know that the word 'grace' means God's undeserved gifts and favour towards me?

And in the New Testament it normally means when he promises to treat anyone who trusts in Jesus' death on the cross as if they are Jesus himself.

It means God's forgiveness; it means eternal life.

And he says "See to it that no-one misses out on" that.

The phrase 'see to it' literally means keep an eye on one another, oversee one another.

It's the word from which we get the English word 'bishop', and it means to take responsibility for the spiritual lives of a group of Christians.

But this isn't just the Bishop's or the Vicar's job.

We're all responsible for one another's spiritual lives, that none of us misses out on God's free gift of eternal life.

So how does the 'bitter root' thing fit in?

On the face of it, "See to it that... No bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many" sounds like living in peace again.

And of course that is true.

But the quote comes from Moses' words in the desert.

Listen to that verse in full, because the Christians whom the letter was addressed to would have known it well.

“Make sure there’s no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there’s no root among you that produces such bitter poison.”

What’s the root that so easily grows up among God’s people?

It is the root of unbelief.

Ah, now it makes more sense, don't you see?

That's why this particular bitter root can lead to people missing out on the grace of God, eternal life.

Because, as we've seen several times as we've studied Hebrews together, they were being tempted to give up their Christian faith.

And go back to their Old Testament Jewish ways, ignoring Jesus and the new covenant in his blood.

If you want an example to follow of how to do the opposite, he says, think of Esau, Jacob’s brother, Isaac’s first son.

The birthright was very special in Old Testament days.

But in Abraham’s grandson it was uniquely so,

Because God had promised to make a huge nation through Isaac’s line, who would be God's special people.

And what did Esau think of all this spiritual, covenant, God's people kind of blessing?

To him, it was worth less than one, admittedly very tasty, meal.

If you don't know the story or have forgotten it, read it later in Genesis chapter 27.

Later on, Esau regretted selling his birthright to Jacob.

From whom were born the twelve tribe leaders including Joseph, the one famous for his coat of many colours.

But by then it was too late.

Whether Esau’s tears were crocodile tears or genuine, they didn't change Isaac’s decision nor the situation.

There will come a day when it is too late to turn to Christ and seek his forgiveness, the grace of God.

Today, you still have the chance to turn to Christ for the first time, if you have never trusted him before.

Today, you still have time to dig out any root of unbelief that is turning you away from your first love for Christ.

Today, you still have the responsibility to encourage one another and to make sure than no such root of unbelief grows up in other church members.

The Bishop can't be responsible and nor can the Vicar, if you don't let on what is happening inside your heart.

And similarly they can't be responsible for someone slowly growing cold in the faith and turning away from Christ.

Not if they haven't spotted it happening in that person's life, but you have.

Take your responsibility to one another seriously!

“See to it that no-one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.”

Conclusion

Four simple and yet very profound lessons for every member of our church here in the villages to take on board.

Don't give in to despondency.

Build and maintain harmony.

Be holy.

And Take responsibility for spiritual life - yours and the person sitting next to you.

Let's pray together.

Prayer (do business)