

The Nineteenth Sunday after Trinity Sunday 2nd October 2016

Sermon

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

A few days ago, an item in my computer's inbox caught my eye.

It was an article by an American professor called L. Roger Owens.

The article began, "I'd been invited to preach to a group of ordinands. Before the worship service, the bishop described the kind of ministers the church needs.

I don't remember the exact words, but I recall the gist: visionary, entrepreneurial, get-it-done, people-oriented, outgoing, culturally savvy leaders, equipped to revitalize declining congregations and launch new ones.

And there I was in the front row, an introverted, shy pastor, hopelessly out of touch with popular culture, with a shade of social anxiety..."

Listening to the bishop left this man feeling exhausted. He thought, "If that's what we need, then we don't need me."

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

Mercifully, he came to realise that God had chosen him for who he was, and not for who he was not.

In the Church, God shares a variety of gifts among different individuals, not all for one and some with none.

We should use our special gifts, and take pleasure in others exercising theirs.

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

It is about 5 months since Hilary went. A number of people have taken on fresh responsibilities, or a greater depth of responsibility. To an outsider like me, you look to be cooperating with one another very well indeed.

How is all this affecting your **expectations, self-confidence and faith?**

The advertisement for a new vicar is on the Diocesan website. Closing date for applications is 4th November 2016, with interviews scheduled for about 3 weeks later.

Do have a look at the Parish Profile, but above all pray for those reading and wondering about applying for the position.

I like the Parish Profile. It hits me as open and honest, and the list of qualities that you are seeking in a vicar, though challenging, does not require an impossible sort of ecclesiastical Superman or Wonder Woman.

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

Our Bible readings this morning give us food for thought.

Habakkuk is probably writing around 600BC. The Babylonian Empire is the big threat.

One of the things that appeals to me immensely about the Old Testament is its gutsy honesty. Prophets like Habakkuk do not inhabit the world of a cheesy grin and a pretence that everything is alright really.

“O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous - therefore judgement comes forth perverted.”

This is stark. Do we dare to approach God like this? Perhaps there are occasions when we should. God can cope. If we are honest and genuine, he will not turn his back on us for doing so.

In Habakkuk’s case, there is an answer, but it is more of a call to faith and action than a concrete provision of what Habakkuk pleads for.

We might think of the billboard by the side of the road as a modern, or at least 19th to 20th century marketing phenomenon, but here it is some 2½ thousand years earlier.

“Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.”

And what was he to write? “For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.*”

We are to be constant; constant in trusting God and waiting for his leading and action, in a time-frame set by him.

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

It is easy to think that we need more faith. This was a temptation felt by the disciples. In today's Gospel reading, Jesus' answer was that the faith that you have is enough. You need to act on the faith that you have.

Most of us could not say to the mulberry tree, "Be uprooted and planted in the sea", because we know it to be an unreasonable thing to ask. That is why we do not have faith to do it.

One thing that worries me about some Christian circles is an almost competitive embarking upon financially ambitious projects, "in faith". It is as if the size and riskiness of the project is a kind of demonstration that "our faith is greater than yours".

I am sure that this is something that needs to be addressed in the Church, and I was tempted to say "by someone who is a better theologian and with more faith than me"!

Our Gospel reading continues with an example of obedience. The picture it paints is one familiar to people of that time. That of a slave. We have household and other machinery to help us and do things for us. Few people say "thank you" to their washing machine or electric lawn mower. These are our substitutes for slaves.

Times move on. Society changes. We may come to see things as evil that were taken as normal in earlier times.

We see slavery and human trafficking as evil. Our own Bishop Alastair has a prominent role in the movement to combat modern slavery. We should no longer treat people as though they were slaves.

We sometimes see relations between bosses and workers becoming dangerously like an old-time slave-owner to slave mentality. This can even happen within the Church.

Expectations; self-confidence; faith.

Please continue to pray for the right successor to Hilary. Pray also for yourselves and one another. The new vicar will be important, but God's answer to the needs here is in all of you and your diverse gifts and qualities.

**Lord, we give to you our expectations, our self-confidence and our faith.
Amen.**