

Year B Sunday 8th September 2024

Introduction

As we gather to worship God, our Creator, we are channelled on two side walls of the cathedral by paintings of beautiful floral arrangements. The paintings and the arrangements are the handiwork of the imaginative, aesthetic minds of those among us with particular charisms and fruits of the Spirit. Hands, minds, and hearts dedicated with patience and joy these offerings in worship of God and as signs for us. The channel directs our gaze to the Sanctuary where we see not a two-dimensional representation but a reality. The flowers, which can be perceived by our five senses, their arrangement, often their meaning of love and thankfulness, remind us that in coming together we open ourselves in faith to the healing power of Christ in the reality of his Body.

'Love brings Blessing'

by

The Rev'd Dr. Susan F. Straub

Proverbs 22:1-2,8-9,22-23; Psalm 125; James 2:1-10(11-13)14-17;
Mark 7:24-37

Introduction

In the Season of Creation this year, our attention is drawn to the meaning of flowers for us and the roles that they play in life itself. Human beings that we are, our immediate thoughts about flowers might well be about the beauty we see in their variety of colours, shapes, and sizes. Then perhaps, the way we use them to express love to others, usually a woman, when they celebrate a birthday or wedding anniversary perhaps, Men are mostly content with a button-hole flower, definitely not a corsage! A beer or a brandy might be acceptable. Though come to think of it, such beverages are flower dependent. What would happen if the *Humulus lupulus*, of the hemp family Cannabaceae, failed to produce the flowers we call hops? Disaster for thousands of footy fans (male and female). Or the grape vine failed to produce its deliciously fragrant inflorescences, those clusters of flowers so attractive to bees and other busy little pollinators? Disaster for thousands of celebratory and joyful events, including our very own Eucharists!

We human beings might be at the top of the food chain but, on consideration, all life is dependent on the beauty God holds up for us to behold and wonder, smell and touch in flowers. As if that were not enough, many are edible, may be tasted. Flowers, seeds, or leaves may have healing properties. That is to say, the power to heal us, renew our wholesomeness when it has been breached, but it takes the Son of God to bring us to completion by filling us with what is wanting, what we lack: The holes in our wholesomeness, the holes in our holiness.

James 2:1-10(11-13)14-17

Jesus Christ is the Holy One of God and the first begotten. He consistently prayed to God as his Father, and the Father of all creation. Paul called Jesus 'the first fruits' (e.g. I Cor. 15:20), that is the first of God's many children raised and being raised through faith to newness of life, the resurrection life. In the end, there will be a harvest of abundance and following Jesus' lead, Christians are the ongoing labourers in the field to bring the harvest home. Well, how?

James wrote, 'If a brother or sister is naked and lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace: keep warm and eat your fill." and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So, faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead.'

James was writing about the outworkings, the evidence, of our faith in Jesus Christ. That faith should show in the effect we have on those who are, in this instance, our sisters and brothers through, and in, the faith we share. But did Jesus say, 'Love your family as yourself?' implying that those not in our families need be of no concern to us. Or did he say, 'Love those in the family of faith as yourself?' implying that those not in our family of faith need not be our concern. No! Jesus said, 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. Love those who live alongside you, your neighbours, like yourself, as you would one of your own. We might see our neighbours as those people with whom we have some kind of contact in our everyday lives, whether that's personal contact, by telephone, or even financial contact, for example, when we send money to our chosen charity or benevolent organisation for those we cannot see but know they are there, alongside us in time if not in space.

James as practical and challenges us still to look at ourselves, at what we say and do, and ask ourselves: Does my faith bring a fuller life to my brother or sister in my family, in the faith, to my neighbour at the club, the pub, the gym, in the house next door or on the road, regardless of who they are? No partiality, no playing favourites? Ultimately, does my faith bring really 'good news' to someone I may not actually like, as well as to someone I may like? Or is my faith just head-stuff alone? Emotion, alone? Words, alone, as in the example given by James? Is my faith partial or biased? Or even more seriously, am I not breaking God's holy law and commandment to love my neighbour as myself, as one of my own?

Mark 7:24-37

In the gospel passage, Mark wrote of the encounters which two persons had with Jesus of Nazareth. The first, was the Syrophenician woman while Jesus was travelling north of Israel, in today's Syria. Perhaps it was from her that Jesus, a man of his time, learned to love his neighbour as himself, as one of his own. Jesus didn't want anyone to know where he was (in that house in the region of Tyre). He'd had a serious run-in with the authorities in Galilee, and it appears that he wished to lie low for a while. But this woman, this gentile of the region, heard he was there, came to the house, bowed down at his feet, and begged him to heal her daughter. Like little ones everywhere, the woman's daughter couldn't come to Jesus and speak for

herself and was apparently too unwell for the mother to bring her. She was voiceless and powerless. Her mother was her only source of power and she, out of love, left the child in order to speak on her behalf to the one she believed could heal her. The second encounter was with a man who was deaf and had a speech impediment. He, too, was voiceless and powerless. His family or friends were his only source of power, and they out of love, brought him to Jesus believing that he could heal him.

In the first encounter a woman from another religious and cultural background from that of Jesus came into his presence impelled by her great concern for her little daughter, her even greater desire to do something about her concern, and her faith in Jesus. She believed absolutely that he could heal her daughter. But **would** he? Did he have the will to do so?

Not at first. He said words to the effect that it was not fair to give to her, a gentile, a heathen, someone no better than a dog that fights for food scraps in the yard (!) what rightfully belonged to God's children, God's chosen people: his own people. His small nation had a history of having come out of slavery in Egypt, wandering in the Sinai desert, being overwhelmed by surrounding nations, like hers, larger and stronger.

Jesus was the Rabbi talking to a gentile non-believer, not one of the people of Israel. However, his words of prejudice and vilification didn't silence her, nor send her off to muster a few hefty male relations to deal with him. No. She knew what she wanted. She had heard of Jesus as a teacher of the Truth, whose words brought into being what he spoke. She had heard this Jesus was a man of compassion. She believed what she had heard and had faith that he could heal her beloved daughter. So, she answered him in faith, love of her daughter and with a truth from her Hellenic culture, a culture which allowed dogs in a house, 'even the dogs eat the children's crumbs that fall from the table'. Love and truth gave her the freedom and courage to speak again, to persist. Here is another facet of the reality of the love his Father demanded: to acknowledge facts; to apply the impartiality of true justice, and bring into effect, to create, the blessed peace and wholeness, the holiness that was in his power to bestow. Jesus heard her, really heard her, believed in her, gave her the good news. Blessed peace came to daughter, mother, Jesus. That brief encounter between Jew and gentile foreshadowed the peace that was to come in the early church when Jew and gentile worshipped together with faith of Jesus Christ.

In the second encounter, the man who was deaf and had a speech impediment was brought to Jesus. Once again, others spoke on behalf of the one who couldn't speak for herself or himself. Jesus took the man aside in

private, away from the crowd, touched him to heal, spoke his command, and the man heard and spoke plainly.

To echo our collect:

O God, whose word is life
and whose delight is to answer our cry:
give us faith like that of the women
who accepted an outsider's view of her,
that her daughter might be delivered of an evil,
so that we too may have the wit to argue incontrovertibly
and your children of want may be made whole from the wellspring of faith
and flourish,
through Jesus Christ.