

2 Samuel 7:1-14a (17)
Psalm 89:20-37
Ephesians 2:11-22
Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

The congregation as the Apostolic community

As we have watched the situation unfold in Lebanon this week, the daily vision of crowds clamouring to escape the war zone resonates strongly with the line in Mark: *they were like sheep without a shepherd*. Our hearts have gone out to these people, and many have felt that much stronger action from the International community was called for, to restrain the powers of violence and destruction, and at least create a respite so that people could leave Lebanon in peace. How might we as Christians respond to this? Are there links between what we have seen, and some of the themes suggested by our readings this week?

The reading from Samuel is a key one in the history of faith. David, who is expanding his power and establishing the legitimacy of his reign, proposes to build a Temple for the Lord. He may have done this out of faith, but it is certain it would enhance his position as king. Nathan the prophet agreed to the plan, but God withdrew permission. There had never been a permanent residence before. A fixed place for the presence of God had the potential to limit the divine freedom. And perhaps it would give too much legitimacy to the host government. God refuses to be held in place by any religious or political arrangement. God proposes that David's legitimacy and renown will not come about by his own efforts, but will be born of the divine faithfulness shown towards him over many generations. There is word play in the text in reference to the word *house*. The Lord says David will not build a house for the divine presence. But God will build a dynasty for David, one from which loving-kindness will never be withdrawn. Not a house, but a household, eternally loved by God: this is the remarkable gift to the Shepherd King of Israel. It is God's fidelity to this promise, not David's works, that creates a community of hope. A people who will live, looking for the one who is to come: the son of David. The One who will put things right.

As Christians we read this promise through the lens of Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd, who preaches the good news of the Kingdom, and whose words and deeds declare and demonstrate what the will of God for the human community looks like. If we follow the Epistle, we see that what Jesus does, goes well beyond David. He enacts a new, single community of humanity, which overrides our deepest divisions. There is no room for any form of religious, national or ethnic sectarianism here. The community of Christ is one in which all who are far off are brought into the promises of God. All our divisions as churches and nations are shameless and frivolous when compared with God's intentions for humanity.

This background needs to be brought to bear on the reading from Mark, in which Jesus appears as the Good Shepherd who had compassion for the bewildered and desolate crowd who come to him, despite the fact he had set out to have a rest. At the beginning of the reading we encounter the only use Mark makes of the word Apostle. It means

one who is sent out, one who is authorised to act in a particular manner on behalf of the sending one. The first usage of this word in Greek literature refers to one who was sent to arrange a truce. In the N/T it is used of the twelve whom Jesus called and gave authority over unclean spirits. It is not so much a truce he proposes. He authorises the disciples to call for people to break with the powers that were holding them in bondage, and turn towards the offer of new life. This mission, *embodied in Jesus and enacted in the 12*, is founded on God's desire for the healing of the nations, the bridging of all divisions, and the cure of all dis-ease.

The connection with where we are today is this. Jesus *called* a community and then *sent them out* to enact the mission of God on his behalf. They were his ambassadors, sent to extend his authority into the world, to create communities of people who lived according to the new form of humanity he was revealing, beginning at Jerusalem and proceeding to the uttermost parts of the earth. The mission of God is expressed in the life and witness of the church which is called by Christ to live in the power of God's reign, which transcends all divisions, and is sent out to reflect that way of life in all that is done and said. This is a pattern of life re-enacted every time we worship. We are not here for our own benefit. Worship is not an end in itself - worship always concludes with a sending forth which implies that in our dispersion we are called to live out what it is has meant that we are Christ's people.

The famous missionary Lesslie Newbiggin said, *the congregation is the (hermeneutic) message bearer of the Gospel*. There are two ways in which it will be that: by the way the congregation conducts its *life together*, and by the way the congregation seeks to *show forth new life in the world* in its dispersion.

At the 150th Anniversary I told a story of how life together in faith brought renewal in Burundi. When he was Provincial of the Dominican order, Timothy Radcliffe visited communities all over the world. He was in Burundi when the Tutsis and Hutus were engaged in destructive conflict. The country he travelled through was dangerous, blackened and ruined, but suddenly a green hill came in view. On that hill lived a religious community of twelve women, 6 Tutsis and 6 Hutus, themselves a living sign of reconciliation. He asked how they managed to be such a sign. They prayed together, and they listened to the news together, to accompany each other in their grief. The community had become a place of peace in a sea of darkness, a sacramental sign of hope in a dead environment. Their life together had literally greened the countryside as others, finding it a place of peace, came to live there and plant their gardens.

What about life in dispersion? As we have seen another atrocious conflict begin in the world, I know that many of us were appalled that it took so long for any voices to protest at the violence of Hezbollah, or to chastise Israel for its excessive response. Governments may be working behind the scenes, but people are hungry for voices to speak in the face of such blatant over reaction. Is there not room for people who live by the light of Christ, to speak up? Think about all the talent we have in this congregation. What if we became intentional about a public witness in moments like these? What if we worked out a plan to write, as individuals and perhaps as a congregation, to the papers, and the ecclesiastical press, to highlight, what it might mean to live for life, and not death, in the world as it is? We could deliberately develop a strategy for public theology. A means by which we send out a message of hope and challenge to the public realm. A living sign that there is one who cares for the human family in all its pain and

confusion and loss. Who wills there should be peace for those who are afar off, and peace for those who are near.

This is an idea, and it is being put before you today. If this seed takes root in your heart and mind, let's talk about it some more, and develop a plan for a way forward.