

Relationships - September 30th 2018

Numbers 11.4-6, 10-16,24-29 James 5 13-20 Mark 9.38-50

O God, help us to listen to your word with understanding, to receive it with faith and to obey it with courage. Amen

We are still in the period of Creationtide, when we are encouraged to think about the whole of God's creation, and the relationship we have with it.

Today's readings are all about relationships between people.

Firstly, we heard the very poignant story about Moses and his relationship with the people he was leading, and with God.

It seems that the Israelites had been joined by some others – here called the rabble, but other versions call them strangers – who were winding up the Israelites and generally making trouble. Manna, manna, manna – nothing to eat but this manna.

The next few verses, which have been omitted here, explain what manna was. The word manna means 'what is it'. It was in fact, an exudation from the tarfa tree, which fell to the ground in little globules the size of peppercorns. The people collected these, ground them up and cooked them into little cakes which tasted like biscuits made with honey. Remember too that they had to gather the manna every day, because it went off if they tried to keep it.

"What about all the lovely fresh meat and fish and vegetables we used to eat in Egypt," the people cried; conveniently forgetting that when they were in Egypt they were also enslaved. They blamed Moses, who had led them out of slavery and across the desert, and Moses blamed God. "Why have you treated me so badly?" he said. "Did I give birth to all these people? Am I expected to carry them to this land that you promised to their ancestors? Where am I going to get meat for them to stop them weeping and wailing? I can't go on, it's too much. If this is the way you are going to treat me, then put me out of my misery and kill me."

God then told Moses to find seventy experienced elders and officers and bring them to the meeting-tent where they would be endowed with a share of the spirit which Moses possessed. This enabled them to cry out and prophesy. However, two of the men selected stayed in the camp and did not go to the meeting-tent, so when the spirit came on them they prophesied in the camp, which caused a young man to go and tell Moses, and for Joshua – Moses' assistant – to tell Moses to stop them, to which Moses replied: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, that the Lord would put his spirit upon them." He realised that it was the spirit of God that was in them, and nothing to do with him.

Some very troubled relationships there, but some which we might recognise. Blaming people for things which were not really their fault. Complaining about what they said or did, and maybe being a bit jealous.

The **second** reading, from the letter of James written to 'all God's people scattered over the whole world' is rather more positive, because it encourages mutual support. 'Pray for one another' he says, especially if people are suffering. 'Sing songs of praise' with those who are cheerful.

The **gospel** reading, from Mark, is rather odd, because it is a collection of sayings of Jesus which can be found in different forms and contexts in the other gospels. Here they have been assembled editorially rather than them having been spoken on the same occasion. They fall into two groups, the first dealing with the duty of mutual charity, and the second with the need for personal discipline.

The disciples were upset that someone other than themselves was carrying out exorcism in the name of Jesus. Jesus told them to be tolerant. The man was doing no harm, and they should not try to stop him – Whoever is not against us is for us.

Relationships here between members of a close group and those outside the group.

The relationships we have with one another are very complex. Most of us have had all sorts of relationships during our lives. With parents, siblings, school friends, church members, work colleagues, marital partners, children, grandchildren. Not everyone has all these different relationships, but most of us have had several. These are all with people who for one reason or another are close to us, are linked to us by a variety of ties. They may be people we know well, or those whom we only know slightly. They may be those with whom we have shared our deepest thought and feelings, or those with whom we would find it difficult to be more than formal. Some may be people with whom we get on well all the time, or they may be people who from time to time drive us mad, but whom we still feel deeply about. I can remember saying, in great exasperation, to my children: 'I love you dearly, but at the moment I do not like you one little bit.' I suspect I am not the only parent to have said those words.

If we look around us this morning we will see people with whom we have a variety of relationships, even within our church community. For myself, I can see people from the Ministry team, PCC, lunch club, singers, and those who I know only as someone with whom I share the peace. We are all here at this time and in this place together, and with a common purpose. We are here to celebrate the gift of God to his people. The gift of Jesus, God-made-man, who give himself for us, and who we remember in the sharing of the sacrament of bread and wine.

We will soon say the Creed together, our statement of faith when we affirm that we believe in God who has called us into the Church to accept the cost and joy of discipleship, and to be servants in the service of others.

We are called to love and serve others, just as Jesus loved and served us.

I would like now to refer to the hymn which we will sing as our offertory hymn this morning, when we offer up to God the bread and wine to be consecrated, the money which symbolises the work we do, and when we also offer ourselves to God to be used in his name to do his work in the world.

Brother, sister, let me serve you, let me be as Christ to you,
pray that I may have the grace to let you be my servant, too.

It is a mutual undertaking, as is emphasised in the next verses.

We are pilgrims on a journey, fellow travellers on the road.

We are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load.

I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I'll laugh with you.

I will share your joy and sorrow till we've seen this journey through.

I can speak from personal experience, and I know that others will agree, that the help and support of the members of this congregation is real and tangible. It is nearly 20 years now since I was widowed, but I can still feel the warmth and love of the members of this congregation at that time, which enveloped me like a blanket when I most needed it.

If Jesus wants us to be his brothers and sisters, and if we are to serve each other as he would serve us, then we need to be active in his service, and look for ways to show and share his love.

Many and varied are the ways in which we can serve each other. Some ways are for those who are physically able, other ways are suited to those whose bodies are not as strong as they used to be, but who can talk and share experiences, and who can pray for and on behalf of others.

If you are undecided as to how you might serve others in Jesus name, then do speak to David.

A prayer which I have referred to before, and which I have included on the Pewsheets this week, is attributed to St Teresa of Avila, a sixteenth century Spanish mystic. I commend it to your consideration, and to your prayers this week, and I invite you to join with me in praying it now:

Christ has no body now on earth but ours,

no hands but ours, no feet but ours;

ours are the eyes through which he is to look with compassion on the world; ours are the feet with which he is to go about doing good;

and ours the hands with which he is to bless.

Amen