

Sermon 2023 02 04 Text

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, and Companion on the Journey. Amen.

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At the start of our reading from the First Letter to the Corinthians today, we read these words:-

1 Corinthians 9.16-23

16 If I proclaim the gospel, this gives me no ground for boasting, for an obligation is laid on me, and woe betide me if I do not proclaim the gospel!

Mark 1.29-39

35 In the morning, while it was still very dark, he got up and went out to a deserted place, and there he prayed.

In the first of these readings the writer to the First Letter to the Corinthians, proclaims that they must be of God, and that they do not proclaim that message if their heart is divided.

In the Gospel reading, Jesus needs space and a lack of distraction so that he may listen to God, and be in that perfect unity with God so that it is God's words – and God's words alone that flow through him.

It is yet another reinforcement that in the proclaiming of God's words there must be a unity and a sympathy, joined in one, for the Good News to be effective.

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And that draws me back to the places of Jesus.

In Matthew 12, in the casting out of a demon, the Pharisees attempt to characterise the charitable dimension of Jesus as being of God, but his control over demons as coming from a source of evil.

Jesus berates them for their lack of logic. How can they say that the charity of his act of compassion in freeing the man is of God, yet his control over demons is of evil origins.

And Jesus asks a question of great logic. How can his act be both partly because he is good and partly because he is evil? And he uses those quite wonderful words "...a house divided against itself will not stand..."

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Jesus uses that same phrase again in Mark 3.25:-
25And if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.

And Abraham Lincoln used the quotation in his famous "House Divided Speech" when he argued that America could not allow slavery to be legal in half of the country, but illegal in the other half of the country:-
"A house divided against itself, cannot stand." I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free.

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Over the past few weeks I have been trying to draw us into a space where the sermon is recognised as the property of the community in the same way as the Eucharist is the property of the community.

And I believe that we must come to a place of mutual understanding, or at least mutual listening for God – so we

must all devote ourselves to the process of being a united house – one where each of us withdraws into a space exclusively occupied by ourselves and God.

It is not a space for us to pray, but it is a space for us to be in prayer. We are drawn away from distractions so that we may hear clearly.

This was integral to the ministry of Jesus, that each day begins in a place without distraction. In the silence, Jesus listens for the still small voice that erupts in the mind when God speaks.

We all need that space if we are to become that, dreamed of, house united – where each of us walks a path to the same destination.

We need to be attentive to those words spoken to the many, and we need to be attentive to the delicate flavourings of the words offered to the few, and then in generous obligation shared with the whole community.

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We are not all called into spaces where in silent isolation we may listen at length to that provoking voice calling us into an expanded vision of the nature of the realm of our creation.

But we are all called to allow ourselves the freedom to grow into that unified garden where all may live in innocence, where all may live without shame, where all are provided for from the richness of simple food and extravagant peace.

If God is in us, then we live together in mutual, peaceful unity. If we choose to live outside the garden or if we choose to live outside the desert of silence, then our deliberate separation from God will lead us into ever deepening darkness and isolation. We shall be utterly alone – accompanied only by the

demons of our minds; confronted by caricatures of evil that drive deeper underground and increase our separation from the purity and even from the healing dysfunction of a life enmeshed with God and with each other.

If we separate ourselves, if we divide our house, we lose the capacity to be wholly in God and eventually we will become wholly without God.

We will fall to the ground because of the weight of our existence and we will slowly have the life crushed out of us.

But God calls us to stand upright, to listen for his voice and to grow into individuals who are bound into a corporation so strong that we can never be broken.