

CHICHESTER CATHEDRAL – TRINITY 18 2019 MATTINS

I wonder whether it is by deliberate intention or simply a fortunate coincidence that, today 20th Oct, in 2019 is the last day of the Jewish Festival of Sukkot, Tabernacles? We heard the account of how Nehemiah, restored the celebration of that feast, first, having rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem after the Babylonian destruction of the city. Under the more relaxed regime of their Persian rulers the Jews were not only able to restore the city but through the work of Ezra the Law derived from Moses was strictly enforced which, I imagine to the joy of everyone concerned, included what we know in English as the Feast of Tabernacles or Booths. From what Nehemiah described this was a party occasion with rich food and sweet drinks to be shared by all, as they rejoiced in the 'Lord of their strength'.

Returned to Jerusalem in this festival the Jews celebrated two different aspects of their life and history. Firstly, coming, as it did, in the early autumn it was a celebration of the last of the year's harvest. To this had been added the remembrance of those 40 years the Israelites had spent in tents and basic shelters in the wilderness on their journey to the Promised Land. In our nation, autumn is also a time of remembrance when we recall the sacrifices made for our freedom in 2 World Wars. The special feature of the festival of Tabernacles, much enjoyed by the young, rather like putting up the Christmas decorations, is the family's construction of a basic temporary dwelling – a booth,

traditionally made of olive and palm branches. Amidst their thanksgiving for their good fortune Tabernacles is a powerful reminder of the frailty of human life and of our need to trust in God. Perhaps for that reason it was rather more than a party, for as we heard during the 7 days of the festival the heads of the families gathered to study the Law – seriously to ponder God's ways for their lives.

Frailty is part of human experience. Most of the time we simply get on with life but then comes that tragic accident, the death of a young person and we are reminded that nothing in this life is certain, that we should try to live each day as if it were our last. The reading from St John's Gospel reveals that, in spite of being with Jesus, his 12 disciples were frail human beings with the fears and uncertainties life brings.

Knowing what was to come Jesus sought to strengthen their faith and resolve for that time when he was no longer physically present with them. He began by outlining with what since the Brexit referendum is known as 'worst case scenario'. Banishment from the synagogue and even martyrdom may come to those who follow him. Through ignorance those responsible may even think they are serving God, as was the case with St. Paul. As his time with them was now limited Jesus must prepare them of what lay ahead.

He was aware that like the relatives of someone seriously ill, they had questions which they were afraid to raise. His task was to offer hope. As their Lord died on the Cross they

must seek to grasp the truth, that this was not some terrible end but a new beginning of new life. Through the promised gift of the Holy Spirit, the living Christ would no longer be confined by space or time but there, to be their advocate, supporter, comfort in every circumstance.

Wherever Christ's followers seek to follow in the way of His sacrificial love, when they open their hearts the Holy Spirit will whilst judging the world for its failure to realise that in the Cross lies salvation, repeatedly empower them, us to live and die in the faith of our crucified and risen Lord. It is the task of the Church, this cathedral's purpose, our mission empowered by the Holy Spirit to show that on the Cross, God's purposes triumphed and that nothing in life or death can separate us from the love of our risen Lord.