

Proper 18 Year B 2018

Three weeks ago Pope Francis visited Ireland. He ended his tour with a Mass celebrated in Phoenix Park, Dublin attended by 135,000 people. It sounds like a lot of people. Until I discovered that in 1979 Pope John Paul celebrated in the same place with a congregation of one and a quarter million. So over the last 40 years there has been a fall of 90%, a dramatic erosion of confidence, for reasons with which we are familiar. And several people have said to me recently how they too have felt this same loss of confidence when faced with the toxic failings of the church.

But, one small way we can try and renew our hope amidst all this is to pray the collects, the set prayers, we use every Sunday with special attention. Take today's collect which begins, as all collects do, by telling us something about God and what he has done. It starts like this: "God, who in generous mercy sent the Holy Spirit upon your church in the burning fire of your love". Straight away we are reminded that the church is not just a human institution that can go terribly

wrong. It is God's family formed and empowered by the Holy Spirit in love – and the Spirit continues to heal, cleanse and renew the church despite all its human failings. That is to be the basis of our confidence.

And the formation of the church by the power of the Holy Spirit is made obvious to us every week. Every Sunday the church silences itself to listen to God's voice as the scriptures are read and proclaimed. This communal listening to the scriptures reminds us that the church is not a self-generated reality but a community summoned into being and sustained by the creative word of God and by the power of his Spirit.

And this pattern applies to other areas of our life. This morning we are delighted to admit Inigo and Daniel as full choristers, along with Jago and Josh as Head and Senior choristers. But, this is not just an admission ceremony but an act of prayer. We bless and pray for them because we believe the church's ministry of music is not just a human achievement but about asking the Holy Spirit to empower us so that worship becomes an encounter with God.

So today's collect begins with a reminder – we should retain our confidence in the church because it is a divine community as well as being penitent for its human failings. But, then the collect goes on, as all collects do, to make a request on behalf of the Church: “Grant that your people may be fervent in the fellowship of the gospel”. The word fellowship can conjure up all sorts of rather staid images of church coffee mornings or afternoon tea. But, the word fellowship – *koinonia* in Greek – really means something rather different; something today's gospel helps us to recognise.

Jesus, as a real human being, would have been shaped by the stories that were part of the collective memory of Judaism. And one of those stories was about the occupation of the land of Canaan by the Israelites. This story would, I think, have lodged in Jesus' memory in a special way because he shared a name with the Israelite leader who spearheaded the occupation – that is Joshua. Joshua is the Hebrew version of the name Jesus which means “God saves”. And it was Joshua who led Israel's brutal invasion of Canaan which resulted in

some of the most disturbing acts of violence recorded in the Bible. This is not the time to talk about those problematic texts but what we do need to know is that Canaan, which includes the land of Tyre in today's gospel, became a kind of symbol for everything that was contrary to the purposes of the God of Israel. In particular, the Jews believed that the Canaanite devotion to idols was utterly corrupting of both society and individuals. So when, in today's gospel, a Syrophenician woman from Canaan approached Jesus everything about this woman was designed to set alarm bells ringing in his collective memory.

And yet there was something that also made Jesus pause for thought. The woman's reply to Jesus' brusque words showed that she relied wholly on his mercy. Historically the Israelites had shown no mercy to the Canaanites but had sacrificed them in terrible acts of genocidal violence. Jesus now had to unlearn the story that had shaped his perceptions; for Jesus came precisely to bring the mercy of God to a world disfigured by hatred and violence; to show that there is room in

the Kingdom of God for everyone. And there is the true meaning of fellowship. It is about everyone being invited to share in the life of Christ and the kingdom of God. And in today's collect we pray that we might be fervent in this inclusive fellowship of Christ and so draw all into the Kingdom.

And then finally our collect ends by stating the purpose of that prayer request: "May your people be fervent in the fellowship of the gospel that (abiding in you) they may be steadfast in faith and active in service." The outcome we are asking for is that we might be steadfast in faith and active in service. We find the same parallelism in the Psalms. Psalm 37 says: "Put your trust in the Lord and be doing good." And it gives that instruction whilst talking about the danger of fretting – fretting about the state of the church or fretting about evil and its effects in the world. Instead of fretting about how bad things are we are to be active in service – be doing good, living out our faith in the Lord even if we don't feel much faith. And all this is not a million miles away from today's OT reading. That reading from Isaiah began from the premise that God's people

had lost all confidence. Isaiah pictures them as defeated people; fretting about being prisoners in another country and culture; fretting with anxious hearts as they wander through the exhausting desert terrain. They see no future. And Isaiah says to the people of God – strengthen the weak hands; make firm the feeble knees. Be active again and live with the steadfast faith that God is coming to save.

So please take your Orders of Service home and try using the collect each day this week. Use it to recall that the church was created by God – and he can renew it; use it as a reminder that the church is to be inclusive drawing all into the life of Christ; and use it as a reminder that instead of fretting about things we sometimes need to just get on with living the faith and being active in the service of the Lord.