30 September 2018: Choral Matins

The Eighteenth Sunday after Trinity


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“Woe to you Pharisees!... Woe to you Pharisees!... Woe to you!... Woe also to you lawyers!...
Woe to you!”

Those are hard words from Jesus in our second reading and it’s so easy to dodge them. To think, ‘Well I’m not one of the perushim setting myself apart by keeping ancient Jewish ancestral tradition. I’m no lawyer, I’ve never pronounced a legal judgement in my life! This message is not for me.’ But sadly these warnings of woe are all too relevant for us today. They speak of the danger of misunderstanding the meaning of salvation and where it may be found. We may not be Pharisees here in Christ Church this morning but are we any clearer on what it means to be the Church and People of God than those whom Jesus criticized two thousand years ago?

Last weekend I was in Gothenburg and I went to their Cathedral, their Domkyrka – named not after the bishop’s throne or cathedra (because Swedish bishops don’t get one!) but rather after its leadership as the Head-Church or Mother Church of the Diocese. It was a lovely service, not so dissimilar from ours, with a robed choir and communion; and they were lovely people who send their love and prayers to all of us here. But I also went somewhere rather different, to the Feskekorka or ‘Fish Church’ down on the river. It was built in 1874 and there’s a picture of it in your service sheet (see below). For all its ecclesiastical architecture, it was never in fact a church, despite what some web-pages may say. It began life with the more prosaic name of ‘Fish-Market’ and for nearly 150 years that is what it has been – a hub of busy buying and selling, of eating, of gathering and conversation, of the web of life in a maritime city. Victor von Gegerfelt’s neo-gothic arches along the sides and lofty interior could easily have been dismissed as an architectural conceit for a society that at times seems to worship seafood. But as the locals quickly renamed it Feskekorkan, the Fish Church, they saw something more. And on my brief visit last weekend with Chris, so did I.
Perched on a high balcony in a father-and-son-run restaurant, I watched the comings and goings of hundreds of people, all of them notionally there to buy and sell fish and shrimp and crayfish but experiencing something deeper – connection and community. The old man bartering fiercely with a young seller over the freshness of the crabs; the ladies sampling a prawn and sharing a joke before making their purchase; the group of Asian tourists who had gathered a little something of everything together from the different stalls before sharing it together at a central table amidst peals of laughter and fast-paced conversation.

This place called me back to the true nature of church, not because of its melee of international sales and shopping all-too-familiar from our own Cathedral Shop, nor even because of its church-style architecture but rather because of its sense of community and fellowship. Most of the shoppers might only come occasionally and some, like myself, were visiting from far overseas and unable to grasp the language; yet for a few fleeting moments, everyone seemed welcome into a deeper hospitality, a community called into more than the sum of its parts.

In our Old Testament reading from Isaiah, the Lord offered his people hope in the Exile but not through their own efforts. Rather he was working through a foreign servant, one who did not even know he was the Lord’s servant, Cyrus, King of the Persians. In chapter 45, the Lord had called this pagan king his anointed, and here in chapter 48 he is becoming the instrument of God’s deliverance of his people from Babylon and Chaldea. Israel had lost their way, they had ceased following God’s commandments, and so the Lord did not let their prosperity flow like a river or their success grow as the waves of the sea; instead they were reduced to captivity as Nebuchadnezzar’s armies plundered Jerusalem and led its leaders away into exile to weep beside the waters of the Babylon. Now, half a century later, there is the hope of return and redemption, restoration to the holy city but only if the people of Israel will see that God’s ways are greater than their ways, his thoughts greater than their thoughts. He will not be confined to their little religious script but shows himself working on a larger and more challenging scale through the work of a foreign military power and a king who did not knowingly worship him.

I feel if we are not to be like the Pharisees, we must learn from Isaiah and be open to the lessons of God’s Spirit moving more widely in our world. That we must look beyond our traditions and routines to the heart of what it is that God is calling us to be. When the Church grows curved in on herself, she is most at risk of cutting herself off from God, of narrowing the love that Christ came to preach, and being most sure that no salvation can possibly exist beyond herself.
This Cathedral may well be a church, that is a kirk or kirche – the Germanic etymology that goes back to kuriakon, a house of the Lord, a building where God’s name is invoked and prayers offered amidst a conscience sense of his presence; but is it also an ekklesia, an assembly of the people, called out by God into joy and fullness of being? The New Testament is all too clear which it considers the more important, using ekklesia some 114 times and calling on us in 1 Peter to be “living stones” built up into “a spiritual house” (1 Pet. 2: 4-5).

Whether we are regular members of the congregation, choristers, Dean or Chapter, worshippers from elsewhere or simply, as I was at the Feskekorka last weekend, visitors intrigued to see what is going on in this strange place, God is calling us not just to come into a house but to be part of an assembly. To find here something of the love, fellowship and community that exist at the heart of God’s own being as Trinity. Not simply a friendly bonhomie – though there’s nothing wrong with that and it can often be the route to something deeper – but rather a shared sense of purpose and calling, a finding of the gift of what it is to be ourselves in the mystery of what it is to be each other. For, as the Orthodox Bishop, John Zizioulas, gnomically puts it, “The one does not come before the many”.

At the heart of the fish-market was the daily catch and without it, there would have been no point gathering at all; so too at the heart of our Cathedral is the daily rhythm of prayer, offered in our morning offices, our simple said eucharists, the pilgrims’ round of unspoken prayers and our great choral tributes. But just as the real value of the catch only came alive in the gathering of the community to buy, to sell, to share, so our prayers need to come alive in the gathering of our communities to learn from one another, to laugh and cry together, to hear one another’s stories and insights into how God is acting in our world. To discover anew that the great joy of being God’s chosen is understanding that others are chosen too; and it is in their calling as much as our own that we find out who we are meant to be.

If we would avoid the ‘Woes’ of the Pharisees, if we are to be open to lessons from outside the apparent boundaries of sacred space, as Isaiah called the exiled Israelites to be, let us ponder the lesson of a Fish-Church in Gothenburg and strive for community and fellowship in this Cathedral today.