

Trinity 3 at Christ Church Vienna

Isaiah 66.10-14, Psalm 66.1-8, *Galatians* 6.[1-6] 7-16, Luke 10.1-11, 16-20

One of the things I enjoy doing as a Chaplain at Exeter University is attending Open Days. These are the days which happen 5 or 6 times a year where students from around the country, even from around the world, come and look around the University and wonder if they would like to study there. Usually, these young people are 16 or 17 years old, and most of them are accompanied by their parents. I'm always interested to see the dynamic between the parents and the children. I notice that as I sit behind my Chaplaincy table, it is often the parents who approach me, asking what sort of wellbeing support will be in place for their child. From some, there is both excitement and anxiety that one day, in a year or two, they might be driving their child here, with a car full of suitcases and leaving them. Excitement of all the freedom and independence and opportunities that their child will have at University. And anxiety that they won't be close by to keep their child safe. As it happens, my eldest child is nearly 13, and as I speak to these parents I am aware that it won't be long until I too am in their position.

The theologian JJ Packer has said, "If you want to judge how well a person understands Christianity, find out how much he makes of the thought of being God's child, and having God as his Father." I would slightly adjust that by saying that the terminology of 'Mother' or 'Parent' is also appropriate for God. And so I wonder how comfortable we are with the idea of God as a parent figure? Most likely, this will be an easier thing to accept if we ourselves had good parents, with whom we felt safe, which

sadly isn't all of our experience. Do we think of God as a strong and comforting Father or Mother to go home to, and if so, what kind of parent is God to us?

As Jesus sends seventy of his followers out to preach the gospel there is a sense of him sending out people who, like the students arriving at University for the first time, may be a bit unprepared for some of the scenarios they will find themselves in. Yet Jesus' initial words to them are far from comforting reassurance or practical advice. "Go! I am sending you out like lambs among wolves. Do not even take a purse or bag or sandals." A real contrast to the parents sending their children to University who are normally very concerned to make sure their child has all they need.

I wonder how the 70 followers felt as they were sent out? Remember, these were not seasoned missionaries. These were mostly people Jesus met on the streets as he went around preaching. Some of them could well have been the same beggars he met and healed – and he's now expecting *them* to become the preachers and the healers. And he's sending them to potentially dangerous places, communities who would have been suspicious of them. "Like lambs among wolves." Yet, even though they are ill-equipped, he says to them "I have given you authority to trample on snakes and scorpions and to overcome all the power of the enemy; nothing will harm you."

"Nothing will harm you." When we feel scared. When we are worried about our health, our finances, our family, our future. When in trying to follow God's call we feel like lambs in the midst of wolves. This is what Christ tells us – that nothing can harm us. As our Psalm this morning

has reminded us, this is the God who led his people out of slavery, who when they were pursued by enemies, parted the red sea to save them from their aggressors.

We live in the world that places a high value on independence. Social media sends young people empowering messages about owning our successes, walking our own paths, living our own truths. And this is all good stuff. But the flip side is that when we fail, fall short, need help, we can feel very alone. Our Galatians reading plays with these ideas, once saying “all must carry their own loads,” but also calling for us to consider helping with one another’s burdens, and eventually coming round to a picture of God’s sovereignty, proclaiming that when we succeed it is not in our own strength, but in God’s. “May I never boast of anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.” When we feel independent and strong, God is there helping us. And when we feel weak and alone, God is also there helping us.

Even though the disciples are ill-experienced, ill-equipped and vulnerable, Christ gives them authority and promises to protect them. The same with us. Through his Spirit, God is present with us, accompanying us and equipping us in a way that is so much better than any human parent could ever do, even the best ones.

And it’s here I suppose that we might think about another parenting image from today’s readings. Isaiah says that God has given his people a city which will care for them, like a parent carrying a child and dandling it on her knee. The Lord says: “As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you. You will be comforted in Jerusalem.”

I think these are extraordinary images for how God cares for us. I love the image of the parent dandling the child on a knee. I think the word dandling is describing that thing that adults do with an older baby or young toddler, where you sit them upright on your lap and sort of playfully bounce them up and down. I remember doing this with my own sons, often when they were just on the edge of crying. And this is how God nurtures his people. He delights in us. Like an attentive parent, he notices when we are becoming distressed and gently helps us through it. Yet this isn't just a simple, sweet image. The mention in this Isaiah passage of the city, Jerusalem, might bring us back to a remembrance that in all this joyful imagery, the Psalmist's context is far from secure. Of course, the difficulties in the middle East today are much on our minds, and it is hard to imagine that wider region as a safe bosom, without fear. But I suppose that's the point the Psalmist is making. Even in difficulty and devastation, in violence and anxiety about the future, God holds us.

And that, I suppose, is the good news on which we as Christians pin our hopes. The same good news that those first disciples were sent from village to village to tell people about. They were proclaiming peace, healing people and talking about the kingdom of God. So often I consider these verses from the perspective of the disciples, imagining myself as a disciple being sent out. But what about imagining it from the perspective of those householders. Alone at home living their ordinary, unseen lives, and the struggles and worries that they, like we, have. And then there is a knock on the door. Who is it? We don't know. But they are saying peace to this house. They are joyful. They are telling us that healing is possible, that God's kingdom has come here, to this home, to this life.

One final image. It's that one in Isaiah about God as a nursing parent. It's an image that comes up again and again in the Bible, and my favourite rendering of it is Psalm 131. Which pictures us, God's people, as a quiet, sleeping baby, calmed and at the breast of its Mother. I love this as a description of what it is like to be with God. That in all the pain and perplexity of the world, God invites us back to Godself, to rest in him. I think that's what we do when we pray. We return to the presence of God as our habitual centre and our home. The child psychologist Sara Ruddick says "home is where children are supposed to return when the world feels heartless, where they centre ourselves in the world they are discovering." Sadly, this is not everyone's personal experience of our own homes and families. But this safe, comforting, identity-forming and orientating 'home' is what God offers to us all. And I think that Jesus' words upon sending his disciples out "as lambs among wolves" only makes sense, because he knows and they know, that they have a home to return to, in his presence, and in God's presence.

So perhaps we as Christians are concurrently at many stages of childhood. Like teenagers, being sent out into a world, unprepared, but knowing that even when we feel disorientated, God will keep us safe. And like toddlers, dandled on God's knee, his beloved in whom he delights. And like sleeping babies, invited to rest a while, and give the problems of the world and of our lives over to our God, who comforts us, and invites us to come home to him.