

Sermon given by Revd Rosie Addis – the visiting preacher on 6th March

Today is 'Refreshment Sunday', where the rules of fasting for Lent are relaxed. In the sixteenth century, when children often left home to live and work as servants or farm labourers, this fourth Sunday in Lent was a call for everyone to return to their 'mother' Church, and so provided an annual opportunity for workers to be reunited with their families, including and maybe especially their mother. It provided a much-needed Sabbath, a time to put a marker down to measure the distance one had travelled. 'My, how you've grown', 'my, how you've grown old', 'who's not here this year?' ... a time to catch up.

We as a church family can also use our annual celebrations to act as markers in the sand. What's changed from this time last year? How have we travelled? That can be a group thing or individual. Sometimes these can be opportunities for celebration, but at other times they can remind us of upheaval or dark times.

The Bible is full of stories of disorientation, of upheaval and stress, where the rug is metaphorically pulled out from under the character's feet. So today, for example, we read of parents who have a son at a time of intense persecution, when every Hebrew baby boy is under Pharaoh's sentence of death. The mother nursing her baby for three months, willing him to be silent so he is not discovered and killed. And finally the decision that even to give him away would allow him a better chance of survival than to keep him with her.

It might seem from the gospel story that Mary and Joseph's time of disorientation was coming to an end. After all, as they enter the Temple they seem like normal, if poor (because they only have two birds to offer for sacrifice) parents.

But then Simeon comes along and pulls the rug out again from under Mary – 'and a sword will pierce your own soul also'. Perhaps she had managed to convince herself that the events of annunciation, birth and epiphany were just a dream. After all, for some reason Joseph had stood by her – against all cultural convention – and perhaps it seems as though they could just get on with being a family. But no.

We all have times of disorientation – losing a job, a relationship ending, retirement, bereavement, family problems – these are the big ones, the huge markers in the sand, but there are also the numerous smaller events of life that can equally unnerve us – that phone call, that thing I said that I wish I hadn't, that look ... the list is endless.

And how does being part of a church help? What difference does it make to us that we are a community of faith?

The people of Colossae were in a period of huge upheaval and disorientation. They had heard about Jesus from Epaphras, and now Paul is writing to them because they are trying to work out how to be Gentile followers of a Jewish Jesus. Do they need to be circumcised in order to be Christian? Are there foods they shouldn't eat? Which rituals should they continue to observe?

This new faith has come out of such a different context to theirs that it seems as though everything is up for grabs. How can they begin to re-orientate themselves and make sense of what God has done for them?

For those of us who have Paul pegged as a hard-nosed zealot, it might come as a surprise that he is gentle with them. He says in chapter two 'let no one condemn you in matters of food and drink or of observing festivals, new moons or Sabbaths', but there is a right way to behave and that is to emulate the characteristics of God as seen in Jesus. 'Compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience', forgiving each other and living with love, peace, and thankfulness.

And that's the hard bit for all of us. Scripture, especially that of the early church, challenges us that being part of a church community should change us. We should expect to be regularly disorientated as we meet together, and learn together, and we should also expect to actively help each other in the process of re-orientating and recovering.

I wonder if part of the annual call back to one's mother church was accountability? The 'my, how you've grown' might have been followed up by 'wow, what happened to you. I remember you were such an angry young boy'. These sort of relationships are the most time consuming and demanding, but I

would suggest that they go to the heart of what it means to be a church, a nurturing community. So whether you find yourself in a time of upheaval, of stress, or whether you feel that your life is going pretty well, today is another opportunity to take time out to be refreshed and to respond to God's invitation to come, eat and drink. The Bible shows characters reacting to strange and chaotic circumstances, but the same God is with Moses in the bulrushes, with the holy family, with the early church, and with us now. Amen.