

Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity – 12th September
Wantage Parish. Benji Tyler

Gospel Mark 8 27-end

Yesterday I had the delight of celebrating mass at the Convent, here in Wantage, for the Associates' Day. It was the first time that the associates had met together in two years and the first time some had seen the house since it's visionary revamp. And I commend to you a visit up there if you have not already been.

The theme I took for my sermon was itself taken from a headline in this week's Church Times "Strengthen the things that remain" – words from the book of Revelation.

The restoration of the house is the prayer of the house made visible. Without the prayer there would have been no vision and without the vision there would have been no restoration. Quite literally they have strengthened what remained setting their life and witness on a new and healthy path of welcome, hospitality, education and worship.

I would like to draw out two texts from today's gospel reading that I would like us to think about in the context of Strengthening the things that remain. The first is

'Jesus went with his disciples' and the second is 'set your mind on divine things not human things'.

I recognise both are within the wider context of Jesus' discourse with his disciples and so I am intentionally, in a sense, taking them out of context though one, I hope, that has wider spiritual consistency.

We have had much to think about in the last few weeks about the direction of travel of our parish. We are most definitely on a journey together, a journey of discernment and discovery of our self and corporate identity. Many of the things we take for granted are being called into question as the appointments process begins for a new Vicar.

There are meetings with rural development officers, archdeacons, PCCs and standing committees. Sermons have been given challenging us to think very carefully about what we might want or think we might need.

All of this is good. And it is certainly important.

But I also feel called to remind us of two things.

The first is that in our proactivity of discerning what we want we should not forget that the other strand is to discern that which is God's will.

'For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things'. This, of course was said as a rebuke from Jesus of St Peter's questioning of God's methods for salvation – namely that 'The Son of Man must be killed and after three days rise again. Man's ways are not God's ways.

Secondly I wish to remind us that we are not alone. It almost seems so obvious that we don't even need to speak it out loud, but Jesus is with us. "Jesus went on with his disciples". His presence among them were the reason they were together. Without Jesus they were just a random bunch of men and women but with him and because of him they would become witnesses to the greatest moment in human history.

We are Jesus' disciples. And Jesus is going on with us. He has not abandoned us with Philip's departure. He continues to be made known in the breaking of the bread every day. In the last six weeks as I have been celebrating daily, not ONE day has passed where some one person at least has not been present to share in Holy Communion. Every day in this parish, where two or three are gathered together, Jesus has been in our midst.

And by his Spirit, Jesus is in our hearts, accompanying us along the way.

In saying this all I also want to encourage us in another thing. Namely the danger of having our eyes so firmly fixed on the future, on the induction of the new Vicar, that we forget to live in the present.

When asked what surprised him most about humanity the Dalai Lama answered

"Man sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the

future that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived”.

In a sense, we need to cease worrying about the future. The future is in God’s hands. We need to remember that we are held by God, we are walked alongside by Jesus, and we are sanctified daily by the Holy Spirit.

We remain. We have so much to focus on in the here and now. We are continuing to offer worship to God. We are actively trying to re-create a new sense of community. We are seeking to gently encourage the health and wellbeing of our neighbours and those on the margins.

This is a strengthening of what remains. Thinking too much, and worrying too much, about our future is a sacrifice that is not ours to make. If we become too anxious about finding the ‘right’ vicar we will forget that Jesus, the true high-priest, is here in the present. It is even possible that the future will bring disappointment again and that our projected hopes will die away – and then dies having never really lived.

Verse three of Psalm 116 says: I was brought very low and he saved me. Turn again to your rest, O my soul, for the Lord has been gracious to you.

The Lord is being very gracious to us. He is walking alongside us. All we need do is as Jesus commanded our patron St Peter – to simply set our minds not on human things – which ultimately fail – but on things divine. And allow God to strengthen the things that remain.

Amen.