

Pentecost 3

Reading: 1 Samuel 15: 34 – 16:13
Psalm 20
2 Corinthians 5: 6 – 10, 14 – 17
Mark 4: 26 – 34

Last week we heard how Jesus challenged his hearers about what constitutes his real family – those who do the will of God. And as we consider the lectionary for today, we are, again, challenged to think about how we as a family in Christ can actually discern God’s will.

Do you really know God’s will for you? Is it crystal clear to you? We make judgements about things when we have all the necessary information and we think of them as informed decisions. In our courtrooms, judgements are made based upon the evidence presented. From our human or earthly perspective we may make up our minds based on the standard of “what you see is what you get.”

But how do we make up our minds with any certainty about the things we cannot see; particularly with regard to the spiritual things; with regard to God?

In our reading from 2 Corinthians Paul talks about looking at others and at one’s life, not from a human perspective (5:16); rather, from a higher perspective. “From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human

point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way.” In Paul’s mind, what we see and experience in this earthly life, cannot be taken to be the totality of what it means to be in God’s purposes. The standard of “what you see is what you get,” is challenged by Paul who would say instead that “what you see is not necessarily all there is” or “things are not always what they appear to be.” To understand one’s life means looking beyond just the physical to include the spiritual dimension. In chapter 4 verse 18, Paul argues: “we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” He affirms this with his well-known phrase “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (5: 7).

Paul’s says these things with regard to defending his ministry against critics who tend to see him from purely from a human perspective. They cannot discern the unseen things and question his integrity, motives, and fitness for ministry. Some are concerned by his lack of credentials or letters of recommendation (3:1-3). Some have apparently accused him of being a "peddler of God's word" (2:17) or of practicing cunning and deceit (4:2). Some claim that while Paul's letters to the Corinthians are bold and strong, his physical presence is weak and his speech unimpressive, even "contemptible" (10:1, 10).

A consistent theme of Paul's defence is his insistence that his ministry is to be judged by a higher standard – God’s standard, and not by human standards. Paul's critics look at his physical weakness – his old, beat up, scarred body and his weak rhetorical skills – and they find no evidence of

the glory of Christ he proclaims. But Paul replies that we have the treasure of the gospel in clay jars, "so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us" (4:7). Paul would say to his opponents that what you see about someone is not the whole picture.

In the ancient Hellenistic world, bodily scars from beatings and lashings were considered a sign of shame and dishonour. Yet Paul argues that these scars prove his ministry; for they are a sign of his participation in Christ's suffering and death in order to bring life to others (4:10-12). It is Paul's understanding about Christ that shows the difference between him and his opponents. "we are convinced," he says, "that one has died for all...so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (5:14-15). For Paul, the death of Christ claims the lives of all, including his. Christians are incorporated into the death of Christ on the cross and now have lives that are not their own but belong to Christ. And just as death on the cross was not the final word about Christ, so too is our life in Christ. What you see right now is not necessarily all there is; it's not the whole picture.

Christ's death and resurrection have changed everything, so that "from now on, we regard no one from a human point of view" (5:16). Paul acknowledges that he once regarded Christ from a human point of view. Of course, Paul never met Jesus in the flesh, but he met his followers. From Paul's human point of view, Jesus' followers were heretics following a false Messiah; traitors of the Jewish faith who deserved to be thrown in prison or

killed. All of that changed when the risen Christ encountered Paul on the road to Damascus. Paul learned in a dramatic way how completely wrong human judgment can be. In what seemed to be foolishness – God's Messiah suffering a humiliating death – God was at work to reconcile the world to himself and to make all things new.

Just as Paul's view of Christ was dramatically transformed, so his view of all people is transformed by the love of Christ. "So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation; everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!" (5:17).

Paul's words have surely been needed in every time and culture, but it strikes me that they are especially needed in a time and culture such as ours. We are obsessed with externals – with youth and beauty, accomplishments and credentials, productivity and profit. We are constantly tempted to judge our own worth and that of others according to "a human point of view." We are tempted to view worldly success as a sign of God's favour, while viewing weakness and suffering as a sign of God's absence or even God's punishment.

Paul reminds us that human standards of judgment count for nothing in God's eyes. The scandal of the cross is that God chooses vulnerability, weakness, suffering, and death in order to bring new life. It is not that Paul is calling us to seek martyrdom. Rather, he claims that in our lives, God places the greatest value on our service to others, even when service means suffering and rejection.

Christ died for all, so that we might live no longer for ourselves, but for him who died and was raised for us. In Christ we are a new creation, even in our weakness and vulnerability. We are reconciled to God and entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation as agents of God's reconciling love for the world (5:17-21).

That ministry, just as Paul experienced, is not always easy. You might face difficulties; you might face those who oppose you and ridicule what you do; or you might get scars instead of affirmations. Walking by faith may not be as easy as walking by sight, but it is a walk that you don't take alone because you are in Christ. Your life and what you do is part of the bigger reality of God, God's mission and God's kingdom. It is a kingdom, according to the Gospels, in which God is at work even though we do not see it directly with our human eyes (Mk. 4:26-27). It is a kingdom in which the purposes of God have huge potential even though what we see and experience before us may be seemingly small or insignificant. It is like the mustard seed that can be transformed into something much more than just a seed, and provides shelter and a home for the birds of the air (Mk. 4:30-32). It is like the choice of David as the youngest and weakest to serve later as the greatest king Israel ever had.

We are part of God's mission in which we play our part, however big or small, and God plays God's part – the part we do not see. Therefore, doing God's will requires faith, not necessarily sight. It requires hope and not necessarily scientific evidence. It requires trust in something higher and

beyond our selves, not necessarily logical comprehension and articulation. It also requires one to be motivated by the love of Christ: “For the love of Christ urges us on,” says Paul (2 Cor. 5:14).

We don't need all the facts or all the information before us before we decide to serve God's purpose; we only need a little faith, something small to start off with. (Hold up a block of wood). What do you see before you? Do you see a block of wood or do you see the potential of a new chapel? Or do you see the potential for a crèche for children as part of our ministry to families in the city. Or do you see a woodwork or building group that works with those interested to build or repair furniture for those who can't afford it?

Now look around you. Do you only see someone who is elderly, weak, way passed their used-by date in the church; someone scarred by life's experiences and seemingly unable to be of any good to serve in God's mission? Or do you see them from a different perspective? Do you, instead, see potential and possibility? Do you see them, and yourself, playing a part in God's mission, in God's kingdom and in God's will?

If you do, then, encourage them and offer your support towards serving God's purpose. But if you don't see it that way, then, I encourage you to reconsider your life in Christ, and allow Christ's life and death to transform you into a new being with a new way of looking at life. Let the old things go, so that you can see the new things before you. Amen.