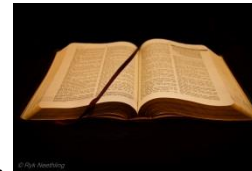


Epiphany 4 Year C 2022

Today we have heard the story of the calling of Jeremiah. Next week we will hear the story of the calling of Isaiah. They are very different stories. Jeremiah says words to the effect - 'you must be joking', whilst Isaiah simply says - 'here I am, send me'. I'm with Jeremiah - you must be joking. How many times did I say that - you must be joking; I told a surprised member of my family - once I had been told that I was through selection and could begin training for ordination - 'it just goes to show that God has a sense of humour'. God can be very persistent - and so can I. I was told 'no' by the church three times, but having finally given in to God I wasn't taking 'no' for an answer.

Jeremiah says 'I can't talk', just like Moses at the burning bush, and then argues 'I'm only a boy'; you need someone much older than me - but God can be, as I know, very persistent. On the other hand, he can be very decisive. Think of Paul on his way to Damascus. From persecutor to apostle in the blink of a blinded eye. And with all the enthusiasm he had spent persecuting the church, he began building the church, encouraging and supporting worshipping communities.

The Christians in Corinth clearly exasperated him. They just will not listen. I have known congregations like that. 'We know we are right'. 'There's nothing you can teach us'. 'We aren't going to change'. On and on it goes. Paul is at his wits' end. It all comes out in this extract from his letter.



This is not an ode to romantic love purloined for secular marriage ceremonies. It is a hard hitting attack on the way the church in Corinth is behaving. We have to put this reading within the context of his whole letter. Think of what Paul says against the background of today's Gospel reading about the Nazareth congregation - those who were first impressed by Jesus and then totally affronted.

When we read the whole of the letter to the church in Corinth we can hear this section not as an ode to love but as an admonition - a slap over the wrists about their behaviour. 'Love is not envious,' Paul writes, but envy and strife characterise the Corinthian church (1C 3.3); 'Love does not boast' - but they do;

twice he reprimands them for boasting (1C4.7; 5.6). 'Love is not puffed up' but the Corinthians are (1C 4.6; 4.18-19; 5.5; 8.1)

This is not Paul giving the church a wonderful hymn to sing at a wedding - it is Paul telling them how far short they have fallen of their calling to be imitators of Christ.

I looked back at my archive this week to read what I had said about these readings 3, 6, 9 years ago. Three years ago I was here (in St John's) so clearly I couldn't just repeat what I said then, not that I reuse them, but sometimes they give me a peg to hang something on. Six years ago we were reeling from the Lambeth conference when the gathered bishops admonished the Episcopal Church in the United States for legislating to allow same-sex marriages in their churches in those States where such marriages were legal. (I still can't get my head around some things being legal in some parts of the USA and illegal in others). Since then we here in Scotland have suffered the same admonishment, for recognising that two people of the same sex can and do love each other.

The word we have translated from the Greek as 'love' in this part of Paul's letter to the argumentative church in Corinth is 'agape', one of four Greek words all translated into the one English word

- love. Three times Paul tells his readers that, no matter what he does, if he has no love, he is nothing. The love - the 'agape' - he describes is patient and kind, truthful - bearing, believing, hoping and enduring all things. It is not romantically sentimental. It is not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, irritable or resentful, and it does not insist on its own way. Could we possibly love like that? Perhaps not, as individuals in very personal relationships. But collectively, as a church, could we live like that? Could the church in Corinth, the church on the Black Isle, live and act in the way Paul expects? Could we be agents of God's love for the world, not seeking any advantage but totally committed to working for others?

Think again about Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth. Isn't he telling the people 'don't hang on to God as if he is your personal property, but recognise that God's love is for the whole world'. When Jesus says 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing' they are amazed. 'Is not this Joseph's son' they ask. How could one of their own come amongst them with such gracious words? But then Jesus challenges them with his reminders about Elijah and Elisha, with the reminder that God isn't single-mindedly for 'us' but is also for 'them' - the others, those we

refuse to love, those we don't respect or care about, those we would exclude. Jesus challenges his hearers to love - and it is a step too far - they don't want a God of all-inclusive love - they want a tribal deity.

On the whole I have found the SEC to be quite good at listening to the God of new things, the God of new ways of expressing divine love. Jesus, in his address to the Nazareth congregation and Paul in his letter to the church in Corinth, and Jeremiah, in the description of his call to be a prophet, all show us a God who is prepared to do new things in order for his will to be known. his love and mercy to be abundantly available to everyone.

The question is, time and time again, are we listening?