

A fuzzy-edged church

A sermon preached by Revd Charles Draper on Sunday 30 September in St Peter's Wolvercote
Readings: *Numbers 11. 4-6,10-16,24-29; James 5.13-end; Mark 9. 38 – end*

Our Old Testament reading is rather rude about some of God's people describing them as "the rabble" They were bored with the heavenly gift of Manna which God had given them. They were looking back to their time in Egypt, thinking fondly of all the foods available in Egypt – fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic – a much more attractive daily diet than manna!

They were, of course, looking back with rose-tinted spectacles, forgetting they used to be slaves, harshly treated and subjected to forced labour. I wonder if we too are ever tempted to look back to the past with rose-tinted spectacles? Back to a time when the world seemed more settled, when our country was more at ease with itself, and a time when the church was respected in society.

In many ways it does feel that, like the Israelites, we are on a journey through the wilderness, a journey into the unknown, whether as a world, as a country, or as a church. The past looks safe and familiar, the future strange and unknown.

How can we as a church find our way when, in many ways, our society is in the wilderness today? How can we, surrounded by such challenges and uncertainty, continue to thrive and flourish?

The Israelites in the wilderness were discovering that relying on one leader to take care of them in their insecure, changing situation wasn't working any more. Moses couldn't carry the burden of leadership by himself. They needed shared leadership and responsibility. So God says to Moses – you need a team to help you. Choose seventy elders to help to carry the burden of leadership, to share the responsibility with you.

It's an important precedent and one that Jesus followed from the very beginning of his ministry, choosing twelve apostles to be with him and to share his responsibilities.

If you were here for our St Peter's Day evening service, you may remember my exploring this subject in my sermon. It seems very important that, like Jesus, St Peter never worked solo. He was always a team leader and a team member. I remember saying how glad I am that St Peter's church is like that – not a church that expects the vicar or the ministry team to do everything - but a church where we all work together as a team.

In our Old Testament reading, the seventy elders are not an exclusive club that shares the leadership with each other, keeping everybody else out in the cold. There's a lovely tail piece to this reading. When the seventy elders are chosen, God affirms their role by pouring out his Spirit on them. But then unexpectedly two others, Eldad and Medad, also begin to prophesy, indicating that they too are experiencing the presence and power of God's Spirit. Joshua, at this stage Moses' assistant, is anxious about this and wants to stop them, worried that Moses' position of leadership will start to be undermined. But Moses has no worries – he is pleased that others too are sharing in the experience of God's presence and power.

There is a clear message here. Not only is Moses' leadership shared with a wider team, but we are told that this wider team must not be an exclusive club, that they must not put boundaries around themselves.

In a beautiful piece of lectionary writing, we find the same message in our Gospel reading. At the beginning of the reading John is anxious that somebody else is carrying out miracles in the name of Jesus and he's not one of us. Jesus, like Moses, is quite happy about it. In those inclusive words he says "Whoever is not against us is for us."

It's a lovely parallel. In our Old Testament reading, Joshua is worried. Moses, older and wiser, is quite happy. In our Gospel reading, when John is worried, Jesus is quite happy. Jesus wants no boundaries, no barriers. No boundaries around the leader, no boundaries around his team, and no boundaries even around God's people. As he goes on to say, anyone who even gives you a cup of water because you belong to me – they will be rewarded too. He goes on to give a strong warning to those who would put up barriers, to anyone who puts hurdles or obstacles in the way of someone who is tentatively exploring around the edges of faith. Jesus says do not even think about putting up any stumbling blocks in their way.

Jesus kept his team fuzzy edged. Therefore a Christ-like church will always be fuzzy edged.

There's another strand running through our readings today which also draws us away from exclusive leadership or ministry teams, encouraging all of us to see ourselves as part of Jesus' team. Because there is one thing that unites us all - bishops and archbishops, clergy and all church members – there's one great leveller. That is our experience of God in our lives and our ability to pray.

It's interesting that our Old Testament reading shows the seventy elders can share with Moses in his leadership because they too experience the Holy Spirit. The same Spirit that was on Moses was now on the seventy elders – the same Spirit, the same experience of God, the same ability to pray and to discover God in their lives. And that Old Testament reading ends with some beautiful prophetic words from Moses: "Would that all the Lord's people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his Spirit on them!"

Moses' wish finds its fulfilment in the coming of Jesus, when the risen and ascended Jesus pours out his Spirit on all his followers on the day of Pentecost. And the New Testament teaches very clearly that the same Spirit is now given to all of us who follow Christ, without distinction. The water of Baptism, poured out on us, represents the living water of the Spirit, poured out on us all. And in the prayer of Confirmation, the Bishop lays hands on us and prays that we may be confirmed or strengthened by the power of the Spirit. We all of us receive and experience the same Holy Spirit, without distinction or difference.

James makes a similar point In our epistle, talking about Elijah the prophet, Elijah the powerful man of prayer. Crucially, James says "Elijah was a human being like us." His point is very clear. If Elijah's prayer was powerful, then so is yours - there is no difference.

To conclude – when I read about the seventy elders who helped Moses, I'm glad that here at St Peter's we are a team church – we work together, and we help each other. And when I read today's Gospel I'm glad that we are a church that doesn't put up boundaries, but is happy to be fuzzy edged.

I want to say to all of us today, claim your calling as disciples of Jesus Christ. Always see yourselves as full members of Jesus's team here in this place. Claim the gift that Jesus has promised you – the

gift of his Holy Spirit, which is as much yours as it is mine, and as it was Moses' and Elijah's and Jesus' disciples. Pray for God's Spirit in your life, ask God to give you his Spirit, whether in the morning when you get up, or when you face particular tasks or challenges, or in church on a Sunday, and especially in that special moment when we receive the bread and wine, and receive afresh the life and presence of Jesus in our lives.

Use the great gift, the power of prayer, that God has given to you – to each one of us.

Pray for the church, in difficult times today.

Pray for our country in times of confusion and uncertainty.

And pray for our world, in so much turmoil.

Use the gift of the power of prayer that God has given us. Each one of you, each one of us, through the Spirit that God has given us, can in our own way, be an agent of the power of God's love, in the church and in the world.

Amen