Sermon for Trinity 3 Rev. Sarah

When I left home at eighteen, to start teacher training, my parents were in the process of moving house. Each week I would phone home, asking where I should buy a train ticket to, in order to go home for Christmas. In the end, I was collected from a train station in a town I had never visited and taken to my ‘home’ which I had never seen. It was a strange sort of homecoming.

I was reminded of this as I studied the words of Zechariah. He was writing at a time when the people of Judah had returned to Jerusalem after around 60 years in exile. The city’s walls had been partly destroyed following a siege and the temple had been desecrated. I can’t believe that it looked very welcoming after sixty years of neglect. It was also a strange sort of homecoming.

When we turn to the Gospel reading and epistle, we see the joyful moment between Peter and Jesus where Peter cries out, ‘You are the Messiah! Son of the Loving God!’ Jesus tells him that he will be the rock on which the church is built and that he will hold the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Yet, not long later, Peter is himself under lock and key in Herod’s palace, facing death. Once the angel brings miraculous escape, Peter faces another challenge when he reaches the house where his fellow Christians are praying. The servant girl sees him, and rushes away to spread the news without letting him in! Another strange homecoming.

As we look towards the start of worship within churches once again, we are clearly not facing the aftermath of 60 years of exile or the persecution of the early church. Yet there are resonances and rhythms which we can pick up. We are also going home in a way.

Some of us would be happy to keep things as they are. Meeting on zoom – cup of tea in hand and slippers on our feet, suits us. Others would love to find a pewsheet from the week before lockdown, change a few dates and put things back to exactly how they were before. I suspect neither will entirely get their own way and that there will be surprises and compromises ahead.

The vision of Zechariah gives inspiration. The golden lampstand which he sees would have been in the temple: lit to show God’s presence. Its appearance in the vision is a sign of reassurance that God will restore both the temple and his relationship with his people. The branches which provide the oil speak of the leaders which God has appointed over the people. There is work to be done, but encouragement too.

Like the people in the epistle, we are to pray, bringing together the ideas, pictures and images which God places within us, to build up a mosaic of the way ahead.

Mostly, I feel we are called to listen, to remember that not everyone in our church family is with us when we gather on zoom. Many have found safe harbours in the storm and we thank God for that, and we are to listen out for their voices. We are to listen to our community as well, for there is wisdom there. We are also to listen out for voices crying out for justice and for peace, and also for those views which challenge and unsettle us. To listen to those whose voice is not often heard.

I am reminded that Peter’s life was saved twice that night: once by an angel and once by someone who took the words of Rhoda, the servant girl, seriously and went to welcome Peter home. We are reminded in all of this that we are saved not by power or by might, but by the Holy Spirit and for that we thank God. Amen