

‘What it takes to build a church’ – A homily for Trinity XIII

Ezekiel 33.7-11

Romans 13.8-end

Matthew 18.15-20

I’ve just finished reading William Goulding’s *The Spire*, an extraordinary novel about will and delusion, obsession and failure. Described as ‘a dark and powerful portrait of one man’s will, and the folly that he creates,’ the book is about the dean of a cathedral who becomes obsessed with his vision of a spire he wants to see built. Despite warnings that there are no foundations to build upon, Jocelin continues, and, as the spire reaches ever higher, the pillars begin to sing and the ground begins to bubble like hot porridge. The dean descends ever further into the delusional desires of his own mind, cut off from the community of the cathedral and finally cut off from reality itself. An amazing book, but what worried me the most is that Lucy bought it for me. A book about a giant building project and the delusion of the priest who is setting it all in motion. I wonder what she was trying to say...

Having the largest sandcastle in Sussex has certainly proved interesting over the last three years, with pipe organs being flooded, stone pillars falling from the south side onto the street below and recent discoveries that the top pinnacle of our east end tower was only being held up by a thin piece of copper. It’s enough to make any cleric descend into terror and delusion! But soon the scaffolding on the east towers will come down, its restoration complete, and soon a shiny new glass door will be installed at the south west side of the church, flooding our church with light and opening out its beauty for all the community to see.

Like Dean Jocelin of Goulding’s novel, I do seem to like a good building project. When I moved to Australia I encountered only a ruin of a building devastated by fire, but after three years we had a new church and a new community centre, a site that spoke of a vibrant catholic tradition in a new and dynamic way. But I remember one of the sermons I

gave to the community of the resurrection there. Buildings are only ever signs of something more. A building flooded with light and speaking of transcendence and mystery is truly beautiful, but if it houses only a small-minded and defended group of people, then it is only a folly and a deceit. Our spires may soar ever upwards into the glory of the heavens, but if our hearts and minds are only in the dust of the earth below, then we are filled only with contradiction and confusion. In the end building or maintaining a church has more to do with us as a community that it does with bricks and mortar, stone and sand. This is because the church – ‘ecclesia’ in Greek – is the gathered people, gathered here in this place for a particular purpose and a particular time.

Each of our readings today is about how we might build community together. In our first reading God speaks to the prophet Ezekiel. He is to issue words of warning to the people. If he refuses to speak and the people perish, then the fault will be with him. However, if he speaks out but they do not listen, then the fault will be with the people. Here we have the prophet as a kind of sentinel, looking faithfully and with truth at the community and towards God, and then having the courage to speak into their blindspots and injustices. As I said last week, its never nice or easy to hear such words, but if we are to build authentic communities of faith, we need to be able to hear them. One of the fundamental building blocks of church life is this ability to listen together with attentiveness and patience. This is why when we gather at church, one of the most important things we do is listen: we listen to Scripture, the word of God that challenges and blesses us; and we listen also through our praying, with one ear alert to the wounded cries of our world, and the other to the passionate longings of the Spirit.

Our second reading, taking from Paul’s epistle to the Romans gives us the context in which the church community can be built. As ever Paul draws sharp distinctions in the way that he argues his point. Here it is the law that gets short thrift, as the law seeks to govern our relationships and behaviours only through external prohibition, carving out the life of the community into distinct areas of concern: marriage and divorce, economics, property

and persons. As important as all this is, says Paul, there is only one context out of which real community can emerge, and that is the context of love. 'Owe no one anything, except to love one another,' says Paul, for 'love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.' During lockdown I saw how this kind of love was so active in our community, with each of you looking out for the other, making sure no one felt isolated or alone, with offers of food deliveries, phone-calls and friendship. It is this kind of love that opens us up to one another, even as our fears would demand we shut down and close ourselves off.

So if Ezekiel reminds us that we are to be a listening community, and Paul that we are to be a community shaped by love, then Matthew tells us that we are a community that are gathered together by Jesus. We are called together by Jesus and held in his arms. However depleted or fearful we might be, however joyful and full of faith, we are not ultimately responsible for holding this community together, he is. And so we hear the wondrous promise of Emmanuel, the God-who-is-with-us: 'where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.' Jesus gathers his church, a community of little ones, just like you and me, not those with much power or wealth, privilege or position, but those who will attentively and patiently listen, those who have the courage to love. AMEN.