

“Expect great things from God; do great things for God”

Reading: Mark 6: verses 30-34 and 53-56

Two weeks ago, following through Mark’s gospel, we had the theme “Coping with scoffing”. Then last week we had “Coping with persecution”, looking at the passage just before today’s Gospel reading. Scoffing and persecution; but today’s reading is quite different; it’s very upbeat: disciples excited at what they’ve achieved, huge crowds clamouring to listen to Jesus, and miracles galore! In a way we respond better to “Coping with scoffing” and “Coping with persecution” than we do to excitement and miracles.

“Negative stuff makes us tough; it brings out the bulldog spirit in us. Don’t expect much and don’t get carried away with excitement because it’s often just hype, and you’ll only be disappointed. But we’re good at coping with adversity: we just dig deep and push on.” Isn’t it British to be pessimistic but to have grit and be dependable, especially in adversity?

Look at the attitude in the country to the Olympics at present: Boris Johnson, called it “Olympo-pessimism”, I think.: “Don’t expect too much; don’t get carried away, then you’ll be pleasantly surprised if things do turn out OK. Notice the negatives: the G4S failings, the one bus that lost its way, the closure of the M4, the queues at Heathrow, the threatened strike at Heathrow, the survey that said most people don’t expect the Olympics to affect them, and that most people have not grown more excited over this year. Of course not! British people admitting to being excited? Never!

So let’s look at today’s reading. The Twelve apostles had been sent off by Jesus to tell people about Him and to do miracles in his name. No doubt, they went in fear and trembling - we can relate to that! – But now they come back

bubbling with excitement at what happened. (It's often when we take small risks for God that we see Him do things.) Now Jesus wants some time alone with his newly returned disciples, but He doesn't get it; He ends up teaching a huge crowd who come clamouring to Him. Then there's the feeding of the 5000 and Jesus walking on water, two huge miracles, but not part of today's reading because they are looked at separately on other Sundays. And finally we hear of a great buzz in the countryside as people flock to Jesus, "and all who touched Him were healed."

We have to test out for ourselves the truth of the Christian Gospel to see if it works. Being part of a church is good for that because we can hear each other's experiences of God at work, and we can hear each other's different understandings of the Bible. We must let ourselves be challenged by others and by re-reading the Bible because otherwise we can all too easily slip into our default position of cynicism and pessimism. Something goes wrong or doesn't turn out the way we wanted, and we say, "I always knew it wasn't true! Obviously, God isn't there, or doesn't care about me. Maybe He cares for others, but not for me! I don't deserve it anyway. Miracles? They're just for others, holy people, not me. Or else they don't happen any more."

But listen to the words in the service today: joy forgiveness, eternal life, glory, God's love for us, peace. And look at what Jesus did: miracles of healing, walking on water, food miracles, telling storms to stop. And He said we would see the same miracles! It won't do to let our selves explain it all away and to slip into a grey world of "Christo- pessimism". A missionary to India, William Carey, said, "Expect great things from God; do great things for God." The Bible continually challenges us to lift our eyes off the ground and to look for God to do wonderful things. "Expect great things from God;

do great things for God.”

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