**THE HOLY APOSTLE PHILIP St John 1: 43-51**

Today we celebrate the memory of the Holy Apostle Philip of whom we have just heard in the gospel reading from St John chapter 1. He is not to be confused with Philip the Evangelist, one of the seven deacons, appointed in the early church, who baptised the Ethiopian eunuch on the Gaza road. There are only a few recorded references to him in the gospels, though in the various lists of the disciples of the Lord in the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke) and in the Acts of the Apostles chapter 1 he is assigned to the fifth position after Peter and Andrew and James and John, the sons of Zebedee. It looks, however, from the reading of St John that he was the third, called on the day after Peter and Andrew when Jesus left John the Baptist in the Jordan for Galilee. The text simply says, “He found Philip and said to him, ‘Follow me’”. Later we hear of him remonstrating with the Lord that the money that the disciples have is not enough to feed the five thousand following them. Another mention of him is when some Greeks (and he was probably Greek too given his name), who are going to worship at the Passover ask him for a personal introduction to Jesus. We do not know if their request is successful as the Lord is in the initial stages of agony over his forthcoming death. The final mention of him is when the Lord upbraids him for his request to show him the father with the response “Have you been with me so long and not understood that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?”

In one of the epistles we have just heard from his letter to the Corinthians, St Paul contrasts the life of an apostle with that of the spiritually smug attitude of the members of the church in Corinth. Despite their overwhelming self-confidence the church is plagued with division, arrogance and sexual immorality but they think they have achieved wisdom and spiritual wealth without the help of those who are their fathers in Christ. St Paul emphasises the difference in the apostolic life with the phrase “we are fools for Christ’s sake but you are wise in Christ’. We are weak, held in disrepute, hungry, badly clothed, homeless, forced to work as well as preach, reviled, persecuted and slandered but trying to bless and conciliate those who treat us in this way. In short apostles are the refuse of the world, the offscouring of all things. Finally, he pleads with the members of the church to imitate their lives as their fathers in Christ.

The second gospel appointed for today is the familiar story of the good Samaritan, who by definition cannot be good since the Samaritans are ritually unclean in the eyes of the Jews since the division in the tribes of Israel in the 8th century BC soon after Israel arrived in its present territory.

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It is particularly apt as tomorrow we shall begin the Advent fast. The Lord deliberately makes the outcast, the Samaritan, the hero of the parable and the religious establishment the villains. The priest and the Levite observe the law to the letter perhaps but something gets badly lost in the reasoning. Just as Christ says that you should honour your father and your mother according to the Law of Moses this is twisted by the Pharisees into ‘if I make an offering to God (corban) of what I would have given my parents it is more blessed than if I had helped them’.

The key question that the lawyer asks is “Who is my neighbour?” The parable shows that the person who is near us who is in need is our neighbour whether we like him or not. Loving our neighbour may involve helping one who has actually done us harm. Last Friday we celebrated the life of St John the Merciful, Patriarch of Alexandria in the 6th and 7th centuries. On being appointed to this role he immediately ordered a list to be made of all the poor and downtrodden in the city, who numbered over 7000, and for them to be fed on a daily basis. He took the words of Christ seriously and continued to help those who were clearly cheating him and to show mercy to those who were abusing him. This is no easy task to overcome our righteous indignation and to do good to our enemies. We all naturally have those we like and those we are not attracted to and I often dwell on the phrase “the disciple who Jesus loved’ as to what it means. But Christ lays upon us the commandment to pray for those who hate us and do us harm. It is not enough to love those who love us as everybody naturally does. Membership of the Kingdom requires us to go much further and bring a new law of love to those around us. To inspire us we have the image of Christ before us: arrested unjustly, mocked, humiliated, brutally beaten, and sentenced to a criminal’s death despite having done nothing to deserve it. And finally praying in his last words for those who have done all this to him.

As a community we shall collect for a worthy cause on Sundays in Advent. But let us use the period of the fast to dwell on the lengths to which human love can extend, as we see in the life of Christ and that of St John the Merciful, and pray that our hearts may be opened to see those in need around us and to give courageously to meet that need as the Spirit of Christ within directs us.

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