

15th Sunday of Year

A big challenge for many young people – and not so young – is how to cope with ‘put downs’ and bullying behaviour, perhaps not physical intimidation but words that pierce us to the heart. One response is to say, “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never harm me” or “Toughen up – that’s the real world. Give as good as you get!” We know that the adage about sticks and stones may be intended to help us not put too much weight on such things, but in reality words can harm us and for life. My mother had straight dark hair, her older sister golden curls. Once her sister referred to her as ‘the ugly duckling’ and it created a resentment and rift that lasted all her life. To do what we believe to be our best and then to be ridiculed for it or for some attribute we cannot change undermines us inside.

In our first reading Amos knows very well that he comes from a humble background. When he receives a scornful put down from Amaziah he does not allow this to crush him. He knows that what he is doing is God’s will. In the same way the twelve rely on the authority that Jesus has given them to give them courage and strength. Our Lord tells them that if people do not listen they are not to take it to heart but to wipe the dust of their town from their feet. This is not the same as telling someone to ‘toughen up’ or not care about what is said to them. After all, their role is to be prophets – not just to lecture people but win them over. You cannot do that if you do not care what other people think. In fact not caring what others think is the first step to becoming a bully ourselves, just a short step from enjoying their humiliation or suffering. Those who cannot empathise with others we describe as ‘psychopaths’ – not mentally ill or deranged but disordered, not how a human being should be.

Amos and the disciples can cope with scorn and rejection because they know that their true worth lies not in other people’s opinions, but how God sees them. St Paul spells out the special place we have in God’s heart in the wonderful poetry of the letter to the Ephesians. “Before the world was made God chose us in Christ to be holy and spotless, and to live through love in his presence.” God not only chose us, by coming among us in the flesh in Jesus, he has let us into an important secret. “He has let us know the mystery of his purpose, the hidden plan he so kindly made in Christ from the beginning to act upon when the times had run their course to the end: that he would bring everything together under Christ, as head, everything in the heavens and everything on earth.”

We are his adopted sons and daughters. We have been stamped with the seal of the Holy Spirit of the Promise, the pledge of our inheritance which brings freedom for those whom God has taken for his own. This is the meaning of the cross trace on our foreheads at baptism and the anointing with the oil of chrism. It is reinforced and renewed at confirmation: “Be sealed with the gift of the holy Spirit”. It is not just an external gesture but a sign pointing to our inward transformation by the grace of God. This is who I am – a son or daughter of God. He loves me. By the power of the Holy Spirit he dwells within me. Whatever challenges I face in life, including put downs and bullying, scorn or rejection, he is with me. These things cannot diminish me in who I really am. If we believe this, then we can wipe off such things as the dust from our feet showing disappointment rather than contempt for others. If I trust in his living presence nothing can prevent me becoming what God wants me to be or fulfilling my call in life.