

Hymns:     1     “All people that on earth do dwell”  
              331    “King of kings”  
              132    “O God our help in ages past”  
              27     “Jesu, tawa pano”  
              500    “Happy are they who find the grace”

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Readings:  1 Samuel 8.4-18  
              Psalm 133 (833)  
              Mark 3.20-35

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### “Cobwebs to tie a lion”

*Prayer*

*Holy God, break your word among us as bread for the feeding of our souls. And may the words of my lips, and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength, and our redeemer. AMEN.*

“If the cobwebs unite, they will be strong enough to tie the lion.” This is not scripture, it is a west African Proverb, and one that caught the attention of the Sisterhood, our ladies fellowship meeting, earlier this week. If cobwebs unite, they will be strong enough to tie a lion!

Friends, this is a week when reading the news and hearing just what is going on in our own countries and across our own kitchen tables, I feel the lions prowling. And precious little to restrain them.

And we hear in the Hebrew scriptures a conversation between Samuel and God about the people: Samuel says to God, wringing his hands - they say they want a king – a strong man leader – don't they know how the kind of king they think they want will abuse them?

Do they not know he will take their sons and daughters for the machinery of violence?

I hear an echo of this conversation in reports of a growing frustration with democracy as a system of government, across Europe –the growing popularity of autocratic strong government, often allied with a constructed national or ethnic identity – the people see evil prowling, and they want a king to protect them!

Evil is real, the harm it does is real. Fear is real. But just as in the time of Samuel, tyrants are just as dangerous as they ever were. Lions are prowling.

So if cobwebs when united can hold a lion, then I want to know about that. I want to know about the kind of unity that can restrain evil without replacing it.

I think this has everything to do with Jesus, and the extraordinary things he says in the passage we have today.

Jesus often spoke in proverbs, in parables. In today's Gospel we see him challenged by those, even his closest family, who thought he had gone out of his mind: they speculate that he might be using the power of a demon to cast out demons. And he responds with proverbs about the opposite of that unity that makes the cobwebs strong:

'If a kingdom is divided against itself, that kingdom cannot stand.' And, 'If a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand.'

And then, 'if Satan has risen up against himself and is divided, he cannot stand, but his time has come.'

But he will go on not just to speak about division, but about this extraordinary, countercultural unity amongst the people committed to God. I'm not talking about unity among the kings, but a unity among the little people – the sisters and brothers.

The kind of unity I think the cobwebs need to do their work if they are going to hold that lion.

So – what is this unity Jesus commends to us? What is it not? And why do we need it, how can we have it? Because friends it is the gift God gives each of us – today – this peace, which is not as the world gives, this unity.

First, what this unity is not.

Often these sayings of Jesus ('a house divided against itself cannot stand!') are used to keep people from speaking up in churches, families or other organisations – through a perfectly normal, natural fear of conflict leading to division. Conflict need not lead to division.

So the subtext when these scriptures are quoted is sometimes 'please please be quiet!!'

Please please don't rock the boat to talk about how you get to a situation in one of the richest neighbourhoods in the world where cladding on a tower block spreads fire so quickly.

Or as we try to understand how somehow we have become, on our watch, a society where carrying a knife might feel like a good idea, a necessity, to anyone?

But here is the thing – folk are suffering real consequences of the evil I am afraid to face, for fear of division. Talk about a house dividing against itself, when some are crying out in suffering, and some are refusing to acknowledge there is even a problem?

And here is good news - conflict, engagement and disagreement along the way need not lead to division.

Yes, just like among the disciples of Jesus, there will be disagreement, testing, review, laughter when something goes right or wrong, and all without division. They might argue with each other on the road to Jerusalem, but they keep walking.

Cobwebs, united, will tie a lion. Will restrain evil. Will protect the innocent, will do the small and urgent works that make a city safe, and feel safe.

This is us I am talking about, no one else. And only strong as we are united. Otherwise that lion will push right through.

I want to be clear - unity, in the terms Jesus is speaking about in today's Gospel, will require sacrifice and change in me, and my heart – but it is not the same as everyone shut up and be quiet.

Back to the dialogue between Samuel and God about the fact that the people don't want to be governed any more by wise judges, but want a KING.

You know, a strong man! TO make us look good and strut his stuff among the nations! And keep us together and make us great.

Well, says God to Samuel, give them their king. But warn them what will happen, how he will treat them. What happens will not be unity, but oppression, an enforced silence. Don't be surprised, if you choose a tyrant, if he behaves like a tyrant. This is not unity, though.

So if these things are not unity, what is unity, then?

Toward the end of our passage today Jesus speaks about a different ethic than that of worldly powers, of a bond more durable than the closest ties of family – 'Here are my mother and my brothers, whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.'

Unity is not about natural affinity, not just about ethnic ties or family or which passport I carry – unity, that true brother and sisterhood is about a common purpose in the will of God. We are to find our flesh and blood among those with whom God has common purpose.

But before we get too serious – and we're in danger of that - here's another proverb the sisterhood, our ladies fellowship laughed over on Monday: it takes a little listening to, and I'm guessing it doesn't translate perfectly into English.

'A person in possession of large buttocks will not complain of the load.'

I take the meaning to be that if your burden, your purpose, is fundamental to your very flesh, you don't feel like carrying it is an extra load

Let's not get too caught on health and other issues around the extra weight in the hips any of us might be carrying, but listen to the observation this proverb is making – because I think it is a true observation.

If our purpose, the source of our unity, is fundamental to our very flesh, carrying it will not feel like a burden, but just part of who we are. I do not mean that I think God wants us to get a big posterior – no. .

But maybe, it means if we are doing unity well as Christian, then when I as a US passport holder, am asked to take on board the needs of a refugee, it won't be a burden. Because it is like carrying my own flesh – so much a part of me. And when I am asked to take on board the reality of white skin privilege, it won't feel so much a burden to me, because it is about carrying my own flesh. Hard, because I'll have to confront my sin, but friends we have a remedy for sin.

The unity Jesus speaks of is a surprising unity. Is countercultural. They say blood is thicker than water – he is saying here that the water of baptism is thicker than blood.

What is unity for, and how can we find it – this illusive gift. Unity is to make common cause with those with whom God has common cause – if we become strong together it is so that we may face evil squarely.

We have heard that this week in London a 14 year old was arrested for committing over half a dozen thefts in one afternoon from a moped pinion. That 13 phones were taken off him by police.

Faced with the reality of a child bringing such upheaval, on our watch – we might respond a few different ways.

First there are the scare stories – London loses control of its streets! Travel advisory! Tourist beware!

And then the calls for reaction –

We need more police. We need more rules and stronger discipline for children. We need more traditional parenting. And then another side of the political spectrum responds, 'we need decent funded childcare and after school provision so parents just scraping by can work and know their child is safe and has somewhere better to go than a street corner. We need better churches!

Yes, to all. But, I am cautious of what I would call 'give us a king' kind of thinking.

Remember, cobwebs will tie a lion. Jesus called for brother and sisterhood to unify us, not stronger laws and heavier punishments.

I do not think the equivalent of just 'get us a king' kind of thinking will be a solution. It never has yet, however attractive that way of thinking, in Samuel's time, and in our own. It is true we need better policing, and funded youth clubs, and all the rest – the problem is that I don't think Jesus meant us to shift responsibility away from us.

Cobwebs united will restrain a lion, remember. And Jesus says – here are my brothers, my sisters, my mother! He calls us together with people we do not know yet, people with whom God has common cause.

Jesus' kind of unity brings us much closer to some of the deepest broken division and problems our world has to offer. And to be brothers and sisters.

So we have looked at what unity is not, and what it maybe is. How can we then go forward, today?

The kingdom Jesus is building starts in our own hearts, in our own households and in our own flesh – God looks at each of us and says 'I am choosing you – you are my brother, my sister.'

We have all brushed cobwebs aside – walked through them.

I understand from good sources that spider's silk is actually one of the strongest substances on earth – if it could be scaled up to the thickness of rope, it would carry many times the weight of steel cable.

You are strong. In love, in grace, you are strong and we are strong. Not to win and be the bigger king on the block, but to be more than conquerers. To spread peace.

To know yourself loved beyond all measure, the brother and sister of Jesus – and to begin to see others by act of will in the same way -

A house divided against itself will not stand – but a people united in Christ – not the predictable people, but the ones who are here – we will be strong enough together, one by one laying hands to encourage and hearts to guide, and wise heads to argue and test and cajol – we united will be strong enough to tie the largest lion. To keep the worst predator at bay.

That's interesting, that's worth listening to.

And it maybe means we don't have need of dictators or draconian laws and punishments to guarantee our peace – If God trusts us, maybe we can trust each other to unite, to oppose evil, to carry the goodness of a society forward. It won't happen by accident, it is hard work.

But maybe our willingness to unite in the will of God is an answer to Samuel's lament to God, that his people should want a king. Maybe Jesus meant us, brothers, sisters. Cobwebs, united, to restrain a lion.