

## **Walsingham Cell Eucharist 11.5.17 (Thursday after Easter 4.2017)**

This evening's first reading (Acts 13:13-25) was the beginning of St Paul's first recorded sermon. Where possible, Paul always made for the synagogue when he arrived to preach in a new town. The reason is obvious: although the gospel it is for everyone, it arises from and can only be properly understood as the fulfilment of God's promises to the Jews.

As most of you probably know, Janet and I have recently been to Ethiopia, whose church dates back to the early fourth century when St Athanasius, the Pope of Alexandria, ordained Frumentius to be the apostle and first bishop of Ethiopia. That wasn't of course the country's first exposure to the gospel. You will remember the New Testament account of the conversion of the Ethiopian eunuch, a minister of the Queen of Ethiopia.

The Ethiopians themselves claim an even longer biblical pedigree. The heart of every church building is a symbolic representation of the ark of the covenant, the chest constructed to hold the tablets of the law which Moses received from God on Mount Sinai. Ethiopians believe that the ark was brought to their capital Axum by the love child of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba and that it is still preserved in a special Treasury in Axum.

It doesn't matter much that few people outside Ethiopia believe this to be historical reality. What does matter is the way in which the Ethiopian church cherishes the whole of its biblical history, the Old Testament as well as the New. Ethiopian Christians have a much more lively sense of the Old Testament roots of the faith than one has to admit is common among many Western Christians.

And this does matter. Perhaps the most important is the sheer impossibility of understanding Jesus apart from his background. To visit some churches you might get the impression either that Jesus came from nowhere or that it was purely accidental that he was a Jew. But of course Jesus did not come from nowhere and it was not purely accidental that he was a Jew.

Another reason why this matters so much is that it is a constant reminder of God's faithfulness to his people. This faithfulness means that God never goes back on his promises. It also means that God sometimes has second thoughts precisely in order to remain consistent and faithful: and so he both appointed and deposed Saul, and foresaw the treachery of Judas. (John 13.18,19)

And so we come back to Paul preaching in the synagogue. Although Paul is often known as the apostle of the Gentiles, he saw his mission arising out of God's faithfulness to Israel throughout the centuries. He didn't go to the synagogue to convert Jews to Christianity but to enlist them in his allotted task of making Jesus, the Jewish Messiah, known as the saviour of all people. Despite the dramatic nature of his own encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus, Paul seems genuinely surprised that not all his fellow Jews shared this conviction.

It is a real tragedy that only a few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus the Jews who accepted him and the Jews who did not began to grow apart from each other, and the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in 70 AD was a decisive moment. When people separate, they develop in different ways, and that is just as true of religions. Modern Judaism, a religion based on the synagogue and the Scriptures, is not the same as the religion of Jesus in which alongside the synagogue and the Scriptures, the temple and its sacrifices played a central role. What we call Christianity, which was of course a concept completely unknown to Jesus and St Paul, and Judaism share a common ancestry. If we want to be faithful to the religion of the New Testament we need to learn the religion which shaped it, and in that we might take a leaf out of the book of Ethiopians and take the Old Testament much more seriously than we often do.