

A Proper 13pm

6th August 17

Place: St Mary's evensong 1 Kings 10.1-13

Theme: Being hospitable to the Other Acts 13.1-13

- ◆ One of the ways of thinking about God that I find most fruitful is to think of God as the absolute or ultimate Other. We often talk in church about our being made in the image of God and God being with us in the world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ. While this is certainly true we should not lose sight of the Otherness of God. God is not another part of creation, God is the creator who was before the beginning and will be when all is ended. God's otherness is powerfully expresses in the Book of Isaiah: Ch 55
- ◆ **8**For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
9For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
- ◆ Encountering God is an encounter with the Other. Prayer and worship are attempts to engage with the Other, not to know about the other but to know through relationship. Part of the journey of faith is to learn to love and form relationship with the other, both God and our neighbour. One way of thinking about the work of salvation is that Christ comes to enable us to

connect with the other, to enable us to love God and one another.

- ◆ Both of our readings this evening relate accounts of encounters between different cultures and what happens when people of faith meet those different from themselves.
- ◆ From 1 Kings we heard about the Queen of Sheba's visit the court of King Solomon. Sheba was an ancient north African country roughly where modern Ethiopia is. The Queen of Sheba is offered great hospitality by King Solomon and she brings great riches with her. The treasures she brings are exotic and luxurious, things that could not be produced in Israel. Her visit is a reminder of the importance of hospitality towards the Other and of the riches the Other can bring. Through their otherness strangers and foreigners bring us wealth that we do not otherwise have.
- ◆ The Queen has come to visit to satisfy her curiosity. She has heard marvellous things about King Solomon's court and she wants to see for herself. The curiosity of the Queen is a reminder of the value of curiosity in leading us to reach out to the other. It is as important in our relationship with God as it is with getting to know people different from themselves. Curiosity led Moses to take a closer look at the burning bush. Curiosity led the people of Jesus's

time to come out and see him and brought the first gentiles into the church.

- ◆ In our second reading, we are in a much more socially complex context. The Roman world was a multicultural one, people moved across Europe, Asia and North Africa as slaves, trading, on military adventures and for many other reasons. Roman cities were populated by a huge variety of different people. We get a flavour of this from the beginning of Acts where we hear the long list of different nationalities and languages in Jerusalem at Pentecost.
- ◆ Not only was society multi-cultural in New Testament times, but people’s sense of cultural identity was much more complex too. While Solomon and the Queen of Sheba belonged to only one society: Saul also known as Paul has a complex of identities represented by his using two names. He was Jewish and in Jewish context he used his Jewish name Saul, but he was also a Roman Citizen and in secular society he would have used his Roman name Paul. He was also a citizen of Tarsus. Our second reading begins by naming the prophets and teachers of the church in Antioch. In doing so it tells something of the diversity of the early church and its multi-cultural leadership. Barnabas is a Jewish name and other parts of Acts tell us that Barnabas was Jewish. Simeon Niger is interesting. Simeon is a Jewish name, but the surname Niger might

suggest that he was black. Lucius of Cyrene has a Greek name and comes from an African City, so may have been black too. Manaen was brought up in the Court of Herod, so he was probably Jewish; but he has a Greek name. They are a culturally and racially mixed group.

- ◆ The book of Acts is partly the story of how Christianity moved from being an exclusively Jewish movement to embracing the diversity of the world it found itself in. The challenge of reaching out to the other and allowing the faith to be changed by those encounters caused a great deal of conflict and many to begin with wanted to resist it. However, Acts makes clear that it was the Holy Spirit that lead the early church to embrace the other in the form of the Gentiles. Paul had a key role in it.
- ◆ In Acts today we hear of Paul reaching out to the proconsul. Through Pauls words and actions the proconsul came to believe. Reminding ourselves of the multicultural roots of the Church reminds us of the sort of church we need to be today. We need to be hospitable, to be curious about those who are different from ourselves, we need to discover the treasures those who are different from us bring.
- ◆ In the world multi-culturalism is sometimes seen as trying to ignore or diminish our differences. This is a failure to recognise and value the ‘otherness’ of people different from ourselves. It

is a failure of relationship. When we meet the other, rather we need to value the otherness of another person and allow ourselves to be enriched by it. In so doing many have entertained angels.