

MUTE/UNMUTE**Bible reading: Acts 15.6-21**

The whole assembly kept silence, and listened to Barnabas and Paul as they told of all the signs and wonders that God had done through them among the Gentiles. And after they finished speaking, James replied, “My brothers”. Acts 15.12-13.

Like everyone else these days, I find myself holding more and more meetings over the internet — family get-togethers, Deanery Synods, teaching, consultations on this and that. We’ve discovered we can even meet for prayer and worship over the internet. It’s marvellous, but it’s been a steep learning curve (!) — especially when it breaks down (Sunday’s problems with Zoom seem to have been a nationwide problem — sorry about that).

But one thing I’ve quickly learnt is that holding meetings by Zoom or whatever demands new kinds of courtesy. You can have a discussion, but you can’t all speak at once. You have to take it in turns to MUTE and UNMUTE yourself. When you’re speaking, it helps to keep it focused, short and to the point — so you have to think, what’s the key point I want to get across? When you’re listening, you have to really concentrate and give your full attention to what the other person is trying to say. And it helps to have a good chair!

Keeping quiet, and listening is crucial in today’s reading. Acts 15 tells the story of a hugely important meeting that took place very early on in the life of the church. It brings together the two main story-lines that have been developing independently since the “scattering” of the church in ch.8. It’s a meeting-point of two worldviews, two kinds of church, two different visions of where God is leading. The story of the “scattered” church, little groups of disciples springing up in Damascus, in Antioch, in Cyprus, in Galatia, a whole world of people ready and eager to begin the adventure of following Jesus — with all its dangers. And the story of the “solid” church in Jerusalem, with its feet firmly planted in tradition, rooted in the scriptures and the history of God’s people. At some point, there was bound to be a collision.

Actually, it didn’t have to happen. Paul and his friends in Antioch could have just ignored the unofficial embassy that came down from Jerusalem, telling them “You’re doing this all wrong” (v.1). They could have just galloped off into the distance, followed their own instincts, formed a splinter group. It’s happened often enough in the history of the church. Sometimes that seems to be the only way forward — but it’s led over the years to a multitude of different churches, all claiming to follow Jesus, but not speaking to each other.

So the first remarkable thing about this chapter is that Paul and Barnabas took the risky step of coming back to the centre to tell their own story (vv.2-3). And note it was the story of what *God* was doing among the Gentiles — not what they were doing (v.4). Sharing what God is doing in my life is always risky: it means opening up,

revealing my own weaknesses and doubts, making myself vulnerable. (Suppose they don't believe me? Suppose I got it wrong?)

And it was nearly a disaster. The first reaction they get is a prepared position (v.5): putting up the barriers. We're right, and you're wrong. End of. What saved the situation? First, the Jerusalem church took it seriously enough to call a meeting (v.6). They sat down together to try to discern where God was leading the church. They didn't assume they knew the answer in advance. They took seriously Jesus' promise that the Holy Spirit would help them to discern the right way to go (v.28 — cf. John 14.17, 26).

Second, Peter was there (v.7) — and he's prepared to take risks too. Peter's testimony 'closes the loop' on the story of his encounter with Cornelius in ch.10. Being willing to stand up and say "I got it wrong" takes a rare brand of courage in a church leader. And it's only now, as he thinks it out in public, that we can hear Peter's mental gears grinding (vv.8-11). That weird vision about clean and unclean animals — that was God telling me something about what makes people accepted into God's kingdom. It isn't what you eat, or what you wear, or what country you come from. It's all about God's amazing grace — for all of us. There isn't a Gentile church and a Jewish church — there's *one* church, where we all meet on the same footing. Wow! (Cf. Ephesians ch.2 for another wow! moment.)

Lovely to see people going to church again in France on last night's news. A bit strange on the surface, with facemasks and plastic gloves, but that doesn't affect what really matters deep down. We haven't got to that stage yet, but it will come, in God's good time!

God bless, Loveday.