

15th Sunday B

Amos 7:12-15, Mark 6:7-13

I hope you'll be pleased to know that for most of this week, you and the building you are sitting in have not been much on my mind. The reason I hope you'll be pleased is that I've been on holiday, and I am one of those clergy who are very bad at taking as much time off as I ought, and we probably all suffer as a result. However, when visiting what is known as the Old Church in Amsterdam, I found myself contrasting it with a lot of different churches, including this one. It does not house a worshipping community, but is a museum and exhibition space. It is very large, unlike this building, and also unlike this building, it is hugely empty. No other site spoke so sadly of the down side of the Calvinist Reformation. We do well to remember that much was in need of reform throughout Christendom, and that one should avoid being party political about church history, but the feeling of a huge and now largely barren shell which was once a gothic powerhouse of Christianity was not a feeling I was glad to experience. I remarked as we left that whilst I knew it was impossible for the Holy Spirit to be absent from any church, indeed anywhere, nevertheless that building seemed to come close.

The Old Church is notable for many reasons, perhaps the most extraordinary being its proximity to Amsterdam's famous red light district, so that one turns from the church to be faced by narrow windows behind which scantily clad women advertise their attractions. I could not help connecting the emptiness and the lack of warmth which I found in what was once a thriving church, with the emptiness and lack of warmth which presumably characterizes encounters between those women and lonely men. I'm glad to say these thoughts soon passed, since you would be right were you to observe that these were hardly the thoughts of one in holiday mood.

Emptiness is a blight on a church. Whilst I often curse our being cramped, we are blessed by this building's lack of space. By far the most convincing account of the decline in church attendance during the 20th Century blames, in part, the self-congratulatory church building of the Victorians, who filled the land with unnecessarily huge gothic parish

churches, very few of which were ever more than half full. Emptiness breeds emptiness, and if you came to this church for the first time and found the nave one third instead of two thirds full, you would feel much less of the warmth which our worship should convey.

Emptiness is a derogatory term, but not all its aspects need be negative. The Calvinists who so passionately stripped the old churches of Amsterdam did so because of a genuine belief that by so doing they were returning to closer imitation of the apostolic life, and we see from this morning's gospel that if not emptiness, then simplicity, is an important characteristic of that life. Jesus sends out the disciples in pairs, ordering them to take nothing but a tunic, a staff and a pair of sandals. They are to go from place to place preaching, and if they are not welcomed, to reject that place and move on. That, in all its simplicity, is Jesus's charge to his evangelists. Keep it simple.

Each summer as a church we are blessed with visitors, with strangers who become new friends. Next weekend, when we celebrate our patronal festival, we will, I hope, welcome many people, from far and near, who have never looked inside these four walls. What they see could not be described as simple. There is a reason for that, of course. A church has no purpose other than the worship of God – it has other uses, but no other purpose for its very existence. A church should be holy, set apart, different from the world around it and in our case it should be a haven in the midst of busyness and noise. These two emphases belong together, because a church which is full of holy things – statues, vestments, altars, decorations, candles and of course the blessed sacrament – can serve to startle us away from the bustle and the fuss and the distractions of everything else about our lives. Coming into this place can take us by surprise, it can give us pause, and in so doing can remind us of the need to be silent, to wait upon God in prayer, to open ourselves in simplicity to the love of God which is always drawing us in.

Stillness and simplicity must be an important part of all our lives if we are to take time to discern the work of the spirit in their every aspect – in our busy and noisy lives as well as inaction; quite the opposite; taking the time to hear the call of Christ and to follow his

instructions gives us no choice but to act out the injunction to spread the gospel, to go out to the world and take with us the life of the Spirit, a life which, though simple, is not meant in us to be silent. We are all evangelists, all missionaries, all apostles. If those titles disconcert you, you are probably unlikely to be comforted by the example of the prophet Amos, who rejected that very appellation, saying he was a simple herdsman and not a member of any professional religious class. That might have been so, but the Lord chose him as a prophet, just as he has chosen you to spread the good news of the kingdom.

How are you going to do it? Remember that the apostles were sent out by Jesus himself. They had a starting point, they heard his commands. This mass, and every such celebration, is your starting point. You are fed with the bread of life, nourished and strengthened so that the word of life which you hear, sing and say, can be something which goes with you, something you take out, and not something which remains within these four walls. Who knows what will happen. It might be an act of kindness, a sensible word, a donation of time, a prayer genuinely offered. But somewhere, sometime in these coming days you will have the chance to witness to the gospel, the chance to share the most simple thing of all – the love of God in Christ. in our quiet moments. Unless we reflect, we lose so much of what God would have us learn, about him, about ourselves, about others. But simplicity is never an excuse for