

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Expectation and disappointment (James 3:13–4:3, 7, 8a and Mark 9:30–7)

By Chris Skilton

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I am told that it is the custom to begin sermons here with a poem – and so I will not disappoint you. Appropriately for the time of year it is called 'Blackberry Picking'.

*Late August, given heavy rain and sun
For a full week, the blackberries would ripen,
At first, just one, a glossy purple clot
Among others, red, green, hard as a knot.
You ate that first one and its flesh was sweet
Like thickened wine: summer's blood was in it
Leaving stains upon the tongue and lust for
Picking. Then red ones linked up and that hunger
Sent us out with milk-cans, pea-tins, jam pots
Where briars scratched and wet grass bleached our boots.
Round hayfields, cornfields and potato drills
We trekked and picked until the cans were full,
Until the tinkling bottom had been covered
With green ones, and on top big dark blobs burned
Like a plate of eyes. Our hands were peppered
With thorn pricks, our palms sticky as Bluebeard's.*

*We hoarded the fresh berries in the byre.
But when the bath was filled we found a fur,
A rat-grey fungus, glutting on our cache.
The juice was stinking too. Once off the bush
The fruit fermented, the sweet flesh would turn sour.
I always felt like crying, it wasn't fair
That all the lovely canfuls smelt of rot.
Each year I hoped they'd keep, knew they would not.*

The poem takes a comparatively trivial activity to express a profound sense of rich expectation and bitter disappointment. Life looks so full of pleasure at the prospect of ripe blackberries, but the painful disappointment of their rotting in the bath is powerfully conveyed. Expectation and disappointment are an integral part of our individual lives and corporate life – and we good at raising the former and less able to deal with the latter.

There is plenty of this in today's two readings. Jesus raises difficult expectations about his future and the calling of the Messiah to suffer and to die. Isn't there just a hint of disappointment in his exchange with the disciples that they can't or won't understand this? The disciples are worried that Jesus is far too pessimistic for a Messiah and they still assume that in a short time they will be in chief positions alongside Jesus ruling over the kingdom. The events of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry show all too painfully how these expectations and disappointments are played out.

The same might be said of the church to which James writes. He depicts a community of diverse attitudes and actions, some to be commended and some which cause deep concern. However the fault line does not lie between the church and wider society, but is within the Christian community itself. First century hopes and expectations for a

new type of society, pure and good are defeated – because the church is made up of people who can still act for the best and the worst.

And what then of Holy Trinity and of ourselves? Let me take you back just a few months to March of this year – the launch of a new Team Ministry and an exciting vision of a new way forward for the church in this area, And now for good reason David, Diana and Gilly have departed or are departing the scene and there is a feeling of flatness and disappointment. And there would something worrying if there wasn't – we miss our clergy and need space to mark the end of one phase of a church's life before embarking on another. It's one of the reasons why a new vicar hasn't turned up this week – much as one regrets the well-meaning but ultimately misguided parent who goes out to buy a new hamster the morning after the old one has died. One of the consequences of a group going to see their previous vicar installed or instituted in their new role is that it brings home the fact that they really have gone – and amazingly to them beginning to look at home in their new setting!

For those of us here, the process looking to the future is beginning take shape. A tremendous amount of work has gone into producing a parish profile and we will soon be into a timetable of placing an advertisement, receiving applications, short-listing and interviewing. It will be important for you both individually and together to be especially prayerful during this process. What we are seeking is not the Team Rector that you or I want, or the Bishop wants, but the person called by God to lead this church into the next phase of its life. When we interview we will not appoint someone who 'might do', but rather the person who is right; and if in the first round that person is not there we will take a deep breath and start again. In the meantime the ministry and mission of the church here continue, and a growing number of people are playing their part in that, and taking on new responsibilities and discovering new gifts and areas of ministry. It will be important when a new priest is appointed not to give all those things back – but for people to move forward in the ministry they are exercising. And then there also be the need to manage future expectations and watch out for the number of times we begin sentences with 'When the new Rector comes ...'.

In the meantime we will continue to discover God at work in our expectations and disappointments – and not just in the former. God is at work in our lives in both. An American writer said:

"Disappointment to a noble soul is what cold water is to burning metal; it strengthens, tempers, intensifies but never destroys it"

Let me finish with two further thoughts from our two readings. Jesus' words about his future are dangerously familiar to us – so much so that we may lose the radical edge of what he is saying. He defeated contemporary expectations and complacencies and offered a whole new way of looking at the world – and it is to that we must turn and in that which we must live. And notice the commands from the end of the reading from James: "draw near to God; and he will draw near to you". We might have hoped that it was the other way round – that when God is close to us we will more readily respond to him. But quite deliberately it is not. The author calls us in courage and faith to give ourselves to God come what may, and it is in doing so, through our disappointments as much as our expectations that he will find him afresh. Such is asked of each of us and of the church at this time.

And the poem with which I began? Yes it is by Seamus Heaney, whose poetry was much loved and much read by David during his ministry here and even if I can't read it with that same distinctive Irish burr, I trust that it still makes its point!