Eucharist, 7.30am, Clergy Conference25th April 24

Acts 15:35-41, Mark 13:5-13 St Mark’s Day

How would you like to be remembered?

Calling and conflict – when I was asked to apply for the post of Archdeacon of Walsall, I contacted friends who were called to the role before me, and every single one of them said, how are you with dealing with conflict.

Mark 13, in the last days before Christ’s arrest, unjust trial and the horror of the cross, Christ warns his disciples that life as His followers would not be easy. There will always be those who claim to be him, who lead many astray. There will be signs, including wars and rumours of wars, seen both as pointing to the destruction of the Temple and His second coming. There will be persecution, you will be hated, there will be betrayal, even within your own family.

BUT the Gospel must be proclaimed to all nations and the Holy Spirit will speak through you. Christ calls us, in the challenges of our culture, the apathy as well as the opposition, false claims, and conflict, to total and absolute trust in Him, our Lord and Saviour, who loves us as children of the one heavenly Father, who is with us to the end of the age – we are filled, quipped and enabled to live out the Gospel, in th efface of all that life holds.

SO how might calling and conflict work in practice in the church, whether in chaplaincies, schools, fresh expressions, parishes, or the Cathedral, in the family of God? Will all be well?

As we remember St Mark today, the passage in Acts 15 is probably one we would not like to hear about ourselves. We’re told John, called Mark, deserted Paul and Barnabas, and didn’t accompany them on their work – hardly a ringing endorsement of Mark’s ministry. The desertion resulted in a disagreement that became so sharp between Paul and Barnabas, that they then parted company.

Let’s pause and go back a little.

In Acts 9, when Saul, having waged war against the early church, had encountered Christ on the road to Damascus, and tried to join the disciples, it was Barnabas who brought him before them and helped them to see that Saul was indeed now a disciple of Christ. They spend time teaching together in Antioch for a whole year in Acts 11. Barnabas and Saul are then commissioned in Antioch, a gentile city where the disciples were first called Christians (Acts 11:26) – the Holy Spirit said, ‘set apart Barnabas and Saul of the work I have called them’. After fasting and praying they laid hands on them and sent them out; Fasting, prayer, laying hands on them.

As for Mark - We’re told in Acts 12 that when Peter is delivered form prison he goes to the house of Mary, mother of John Mark, Mark is from Jerusalem, and is with Paul (still called Saul) and Barnabas by the end of Acts 12.

We are told in Acts 13 that Barnabas and Saul, assisted by John Mark, go to Cyprus, and proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews (12:5b). And at this point Saul is also known as Paul (13:9).

By Acts 13:13 they have gone through the whole of the island of Cyprus to Paphos. Barnabas and Paul then set sail to Perga in Pamphylia, in modern day Turkey. It was a city dominated by the worship of the goddess Artemis. All OK so far. Or is it? Acts 13@13b tells us that John Mark however left them and returned to Jerusalem.

There has been much speculation as to why Mark left Barnabas and Paul, having proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews in Cyprus. Was the prospect of pagan Perga too much? We can’t be sure, what we are told in Acts 15 is that the pain/disappointment/anger Paul feels about Mark. Is it supposed to be like this between followers of Christ?

Paul and Barnabas have been doing ministry together, including the Council at Jerusalem, telling of all the signs and wonders Gd had done among the gentiles. The major issue of the day was settle, laid to rest, as they took the letter of welcome to the Gentiles, saying they didn’t need to be circumcised to become Christians. Yet when we might expect joy and celebration, anger flares. How many months had Mark’s desertion been playing on Paul’s mind, unresolved, ready to blow?

This is no minor disagreement between Barnabas and Paul – the Greek refers to a huge row, a severe quarrel, suggesting loud voices, red faces, words being said that shouldn’t have been.

Calling, fasting, prayer, anointing, sent out, ministering, yet conflict within the family of God.

In God’s grace and mercy, he used this quarrel – for as they parted company Barnabas took Mark back to Cyprus and Paul and Silas go, praying and seeking the Holy Spirit, on what we now call Paul’s second missionary journey. God can use conflict for the growth of his kingdom.

Differences, disagreement, conflict between believers is nothing new, but neither is the responsibility of both parties to address their differences, for all are part of the ONE body of Christ. Knowing you are called, equipped and enabled through prayer and the Holy Spirit, what part do you play in resolving conflict?

We don’t know how long it took, but, in Colossian 4:10 written when Paul was in prison in 60-62AD, Mark, and Barnabas, are mentioned in Paul’s greeting at the end of the letter, Mark the cousin of Barnabas, concerning whom you have been given instructions – if he comes to you welcome him.

In 2 Tim 4:11, during Paul’s second imprisonment 64-64 AD – Paul writes to Timothy declaring that only Luke is with him – ‘get Mark and bring him with you, for he is useful in my ministry.’

We are not called for conflict, we are called by Christ – John 13:34 to love one another as I have loved you – love that is costly, sacrificial, and eternal – why? Because by this all will know you are my disciples, because you love one another.

Fast, pray, lay hands, send out. Love one another as I have loved you.

May the communities we serve, see Christ and not conflict.

AMEN