

The Disappointing Church

(Hebrews 13.1-8, 15-16)

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Letters

I've got a confession to make! I've spent much of my life bored senseless by the New Testament Epistles. Love the Gospels... but the letters I found turgid... full of disembodied doctrine, impenetrable arguments and moralistic finger-pointing. But then a colleague pointed out that just a little detective work revealed fascinating stories written between the lines. Because these *are* letters, written to real churches about real issues. Let me explain via today's reading from *Hebrews* (13.1-8, 15-16) ...

We know almost nothingⁱ about the church this was writtenⁱⁱ to, but we *can* see the issues this church community is facing.

Look at verse 3... "*Remember those who are in prison, as though you were in prison with them; those who are being tortured, as though you yourselves were being tortured.*" This is a church that's experienced vigorous persecution, and some of its members are still imprisoned. But this Christian community, presumably now in a period of safety, is actually forgetting their brothers and sisters left incarcerated! How do we know this? Simple... because if it wasn't happening, there'd be no need for the letter to talk about it. What a disappointing church the *Hebrews* community must have been. Fancy doing that!

Can you see how this spices up the reading? But there's more...

"... *let the marriage bed be kept undefiled; for God will judge fornicators and adulterers*" (4) Not too hard to read between the lines here! Not only are the *Hebrews* church forgetting their colleagues in prison, but they're getting into fornication and adultery with notable enthusiasm! All of a sudden *this is interesting!* It's a bit like reading a Jackie Collins paperbackⁱⁱⁱ.

And there's more... they're being lax in hospitality to strangers (2), they're obsessed with money (5) and failing to respect their leaders (7)! What sort of a church are we dealing with here? This church of *the Hebrews* is a very very disappointing church! I'd be embarrassed to be a member!

Disappointment and an Imperfect Church

The Christian Church has always been imperfect. There's a tendency to want to idealise the Early Church as somehow better than us... assuming that being closer to direct experience with Jesus, would make for a more perfect expression of faith.^{iv} But reading the NT with open eyes reveals anything *but* perfection. We encounter a church that struggles just as much as we do in the 21st century. Some issues are similar... some very different... but the imperfection is the same.

Disappointing isn't it... In fact the Church *is* often disappointing. In our experience, the Church rarely lives up to the hopes, dreams and expectations we place on it. Indeed there will be many of us here today who currently harbour feelings of disappointment about this parish. So what do we do with it? It needs careful handling... because disappointment has the power to completely take over how we see people and day-by-day events... and it carries strong emotions.

Very commonly it expresses itself in projection – we allocate our disappointment to others saying, *'if only they did this or that or whatever... then we'd be a good or happy church.'* Often this projection is attached to the parish priest. (Rowan Williams once said that clergy are *lightening rods* for people's frustration, anger and disappointments... it goes with the job.) But of course it also projects onto other parishioners whether in leadership or not. It's toxic in a church – it breeds criticism, gossip and conflict. And it also eats away at the heart of the disappointed person... not only robbing them of pleasure and joy, but often producing a growing sense of alienation from the community... a distancing that will end in total separation if not checked. Underneath the disappointment that we project outwards onto others, is an unconscious feeling of disappointment with ourselves. That *we're* not better, not more faithful than we are...

Disappointment is part of the Christian experience – we all know it one way or another. And it doesn't need to be toxic... if we can just look at disappointment for what it is, separate from any allocation of blame... It's very natural... indeed it's inevitable... because our Christian experience is always less than we wish that it would be... our parishes are never as healthy or as vital as we want them to be. (Of course we're disappointed!)

But what if we just stopped all that projection stuff, and sat with the simple reality. *'This church is not all that I wanted or hoped for. And in truth I'm not all that I would like to be either.'* If we just sat with that truth... and from that simple acceptance of 'how it is'... then tried to open ourselves to what the Spirit might want to do *with* that reality.

The Disappointing Church

Ten years back I came across a fascinating quotation from the English spiritual guide, Simon Tugwell... He said,

"The Christian church has to be disappointing because it's not a mechanism for achieving our own human ambitions or aspirations. (Rather) it is a mechanism for subjecting all things to the will of God." ^{vi}

It's quite challenging...

He's saying that the church isn't here to meet our personal agenda... our hopes, our dreams, our needs. In fact the church has a duty NOT to... The church *has* to disappoint us... so that we might be jolted into the much bigger agenda of God. The church *"is a mechanism for subjecting all things to the will of God..."* which probably sounds terribly forbidding, but is simply saying, that the church exists to serve that much bigger creative purpose of God. God is drawing all creation to fulfilment... and the church serves *that* end... It's not here to make us happy or comfortable or satisfied... not here to meet our needs or expectations.

Of course we're disappointed because what we want *isn't* being met... but that disappointment is good for us... if we allow it to open us to a much bigger agenda of what God is trying to do... in our world, in our church and in our lives.

So yes, St Theodore's *is* disappointing... but that might be a door opening to a bigger world... if we can stop projecting it out or blaming ourselves... and instead just sit with this reality... open to what God may do with us. That's my view as parish priest. God *is* doing something here... and that work is not subject to my limited concept of what 'should be'... let alone what I would like.

What Sort of Church

What sort of a church was the community of the *Letter to the Hebrews*? At first glance it's terribly disappointing. But we can't ever know their true character... because we can only hear one side of the conversation frozen in time. We can hear that God is calling them to a deeper faith, to deeper love and community... but we never get to hear *their* response. What did *they* say back? Were they faithful... responsive... generous...? What was their legacy I wonder – how did they fit into that much bigger agenda of God?

I wonder what God is doing with us? Who knows... But all we need to focus on is... are we open... will we be responsive? And critical to that process... are we willing to accept the disappointment, that it *won't* ever be just the way we'd like it.

ⁱ There's even significant disagreement over which decade it's written in, let alone where and who.

ⁱⁱ Interesting in this context is that *Hebrews* may originally have been a sermon!

ⁱⁱⁱ Or whatever the 21st century equivalent is.

^{iv} Interestingly a significant impetus behind the Protestant movement, both at its origins and continuing today, comes from this idealisation.

^v Disappointment is *very* common in clergy... and often terminally toxic because we confuse our self-identity with the success or failure of our parishes.

^{vi} Simon Tugwell, "*Ways of Imperfection*"