

SERMON FOR 19th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME YEAR C

ALL SAINTS CHURCH, BIRKENHEAD

George Fredrick Handel was a German-born British Baroque composer, famous for his operas, oratorios, anthems and organ concertos. He settled in London in 1712 and quickly rose to be one of the great baroque composers of his time. Handel was one of those giants of music, and it is a testament to his skill that his works are still performed today. The most famous of his pieces would be his Messiah, which I am sure many of you would be familiar with.

Handel had a difficult life, despite his lasting popularity, he was often very poor and shunned by the public. One of the reasons for this was that the puritan church of the time was indignant that a man such as himself would put the Holy Scriptures to music and dare perform it in a secular environment, a startling idea to us now days. But nonetheless Handel endured and was known for his philanthropy, especially in raising money to free people from debtors' prison, to which he was threatened with himself many times.

Handel is mentioned by a contemporary Sir John Hawkins as being some who "*would frequently declare the pleasure he felt in setting the Scriptures to music, and how contemplating the many sublime*

passages in the Psalms had contributed to his edification." It seems this pleasure was a driving force in his composition.

It is an amazing thing, to find pleasure in God when contemplating such things as music and art. In Fact, it is one the great aspects of our humanity. One of my most favourite pieces from Handel's Messiah is called "If God be for us, who can be against us?" not only is the music and singing beautiful it also carries a profound message.

I remember when I got involved again with the church in a serious way, I was at Unitec studying performance technology. To be a Christian in that environment was challenging at times and I often found it difficult. However, at around the same time I stumbled upon that piece of music by Handel, and it brought me great comfort. To understand that God was for me, and that God took great pleasure in revealing himself to me was a profound experience. And it certainly got me through some difficult times.

And I think in a way, Jesus was someone who took great pleasure in encouraging his band of disciples. In today's gospel, he says many things of importance, but for me it is the opening line "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

God taking pleasure in his people is not a theme that occurs often in the Gospel's but when it does, it is often in conjunction with significant moments. The pattern of the

phrase 'God's good pleasure' is present in the Birth narrative of Jesus; heralding God's coming amongst us. And this connects well of course as we celebrate our Mother's Union ministry this morning. We believe that one of the greatest gifts of God is children, and of course the mothers and homes in which they are nourished and encouraged as they grow.

The next moment which also has a connection with Mother's Union is that of Jesus Baptism. We know God takes delight in the baptism of a child into the family of God, and this is of course where God takes great pleasure in Jesus and the ministry that lies ahead of him. And thirdly, again with a thematic connection to Mother's Union, the revealing of Gospel meanings to infants, God is said to take good pleasure. In fact, the Greek work used in all these passages meaning 'divine pleasure' is in the tense indicating completed action. So therefore, it is saying God has given us the great gift of the kingdom already, we need only embrace it.

Unfortunately for many Christians and non-Christians alike, such a notion of God's great pleasure in us is marred with images of God as wrathful and vengeful. And it creates a works-based faith, where you can only get into heaven if you don't do certain things.

This is a misrepresentation of the Gospel. Jesus in this passage is declaring in such tender yet definitive terms, little flock do

not be worried and anxious, for the things of this world will pass away, times will be hard, and you may even err and stray, but that does not change the fact that God is for us, not against us.

It would have been a profound message to that bunch of disciples who seemed to get so anxious and not understand. It would also help make sense of what would happen to them after Jesus' resurrection, that they would face immense difficulties, poverty, and rejection, yet God was always with them.

I wonder what it says to us today. In a world that is full of anxiety and where religion is pushed to the edges and viewed with suspicion, it is so easy to feel that God is absent, and if he is there, he does not care. It is an easy mind-set to have when faced with the complex and challenging issues that we now face as a church.

But Jesus time and time again speaks down the ages, saying, if God be for us, who can be against us? If God's good pleasure is to give us the kingdom, then why don't more people embrace it? There is no easy answer here, but for us who have faith, we need to be a people who constantly remind ourselves of this startling fact, God delights in us, with all our weaknesses, and anxiety.

Therefore, I feel it is our task, just as I think it was Handel's over 250 years ago to remind the world with our gifts and

talents that God takes great pleasure in his creation, and desires to be in relationship with it. This passage re-orientates us towards the whole of life as an abundant gift from a generous God, a gift that can, therefore, be given away with abandon. Just like the gift of Motherhood and the work of the mother's union that Mary Sumner established all those years ago, May God's pleasure become our good pleasure, and may we always know, "If God be for us, who can be against us?" Amen.