

A means to an end, never the end itself

A sermon preached by Very Rev Jim Mein at St Margaret's on 9 September 2018
Our readings were Isaiah 35.4-7a; James 2.1-17 and Mark 7.24-37

I've not been working with a congregation for the past few months, and we have been away a lot, and the golf season is in full swing – so I've not been in touch with the weekly on-going life of the Church for a while. At the same time I have been trying to think about the Church and our mission quite a bit. I start with that dicotomy because I confess I find it easier to think positively about the Church when I'm working in it, with the people who make it up, than I do if I'm simply looking from the outside at the institution.

I think this is partly because there is a tendency in our society to denigrate all institutions. We are suspicious off, if not downright antagonistic to, politicians, lawyers, police, trade Unions, bankers, football managers, doctors, pension funds, train and bus companies, and Churches. We blame THEM, whoever they are, for whatever is not going well for us – and this is extremely dangerous – dangerous because if we can blame someone else we don't have to do anything ourselves.

But my seeing the Church differently when I am working within it and when I on the sidelines is not only a reflection of a general pattern in society. Nor do I think it is just a personal problem. I believe it reflects a problem we have in mission and it is about mission I want to talk this morning.

Our Epistle today started by looking at how the Church community treated newcomers. Did it depend on whether they were wealthy or needy? Of course we know what the answer should be, what we would like it to be, what we might even think that it is. But actually it is not always so easy. Almost all our Churches today are facing a crisis of available resources. Most

congregations are struggling, struggling to keep their building in good shape and to pay their Priest and meet their quota to the Diocese and so on. Most of the people give generously but I suspect that they sometimes wish they could give their generous donations to other things – their Church giving is a kind of duty, a necessity to keep the show on the road. When they want to really help the poor and needy in the world they give to OXFAM or Amnesty or Shelter or one of the multitude of charities that claim to spend their money on direct help to those in need. Giving to the Church comes somewhere between paying our taxes and real charity.

It's not that I blame congregations for the way they spend their money. I think buildings and clergy are really really good things to have. I know how much easier it is to feel the presence of mystery and wonder and faith in a beautiful building than in a miserable meeting room with peeling paint and inadequate heating. And I also know that whether congregations prosper or decline, in the long run, almost always reflects the leadership given by their Rector.

But in the end these things are still secondary, still means towards an end, and that end is, as James' letter put it this morning, loving our neighbour. He called it the royal law, the most important law. And he went on to talk of faith without works being dead. If we simply keep up our institution but have no energy left over to love those in need, it is all wasted.

The Church is not alone in facing this situation. Government, particularly today local government, has very difficult choices to make about the use of their resources.

How do they keep the structures viable and still afford the front-line troops who do the real work? That may just be an academic question for us, not really our problem, but when we think about the Church it is a matter for all of us. And this morning I'm not about to produce a magic answer but simply suggest a particular approach.

I come to this with a basic belief that our fundamental purpose is to love one another. Our mission is to love the world. It is not to get more members. If more people join us because they see the value of what we are doing, if they see that what we believe actually bears fruit, if our faith is reflected in our works, then that is great – and with more members we will be able to do more. But our mission is not to build up the Church, it is to serve the world.

I know many are fearful that the Church as an institution is dying; numbers are declining, especially amongst the young. It is not everywhere as bad as we sometimes think – there are green shoots in places – but we would be blind not to realise that the Churches face enormous difficulties. But if the Church is to die, it must be because it has given itself for God's world, not because it had been so concerned with its own survival that the world has found it irrelevant.

I still remember a children's ditty we sang on my first Sabbatical in 1980 in Canada:

The church is not a building;
the Church is not a steeple;
the Church is not a resting place;
the Church is a people.

I am the Church,
you are the Church,
we are the Church together.

Or, put differently with the same idea, a more recent hymn written by Jean Holloway:

Fired with the Spirit,
filled with light and life;
Ours is a Church to challenge
and excite;
Mission sustained by love and faith
and power,
Extends God's love to
people everywhere.

I'm delighted Kenny is coming to be your Rector, and I hope he will continue to see his mission as being partly to support, encourage, enthuse you, but also to be a sign out there in the community of God's love for those who are outside as well as those inside. This was the message of our Gospel today: Jesus went away into the region of Tyre and met the Syrophenician woman, and from there he went via Sidon to the region of the Decapolis – all areas outside Judea and where he treated people who were not within the faith community

We come to Church to deepen our faith, to find the grace, the encouragement, the support we need. So yes, we need amongst us folk who will sit on Vestry and look after the building, and keep our members caring for one another – this is essential work. But we have people doing this much-needed work in order that we can all be better equipped for the work which is out there in our daily lives – loving our neighbours. The Church is always a means to an end, never the end itself.