

Sermon: St. James Cambridge

Easter 4

21 April 2013 APCM

The Revd Jutta Brueck

Acts 9.36-43

Ps. 23

Rev. 7. 9-17

John 10. 22-30

Today is our Annual Parochial Church meeting, an occasion when we take stock of the last calendar year, and also attend to the practical aspects of running a church.

I hope you've all had a chance to look through the APCM papers which have been available for the last few weeks. Casting our minds back to 2012 – it seems a long time ago - we started the year with a row of deaths – some longstanding members, who died at the end of a long life after a period of illness; others, like Ella and Doreen, who died unexpectedly and suddenly. Others, like Wendy and Derek, too young, but yet, God called them home.

For several months we lived with this real awareness that in the midst of life, there is death; but also with the powerful experience of being carried through this time by our faith and friendships.

When we embarked on the banner making project, which started in Lent and was completed at Pentecost, we were not aware that the process of creating the banner, and the banner itself, would become expressions of that journey of faith and communion which we share with each other in this church. Those who had the courage to take on the responsibility of designing and making the banner found it a powerful experience of having to rely on faith – as well as the skill they brought to it- as the banner was unfolding. And the process enabled lots of people to be involved – from primary school age to ninety plus; it became an occasion to celebrate the communion of the living and the dead, to express love and prayers through hours of diligent sowing and careful stitching.

And as the path runs through the centre of the banner, we are reminded that we are on this pilgrimage of life – each of us with our unique calling and journey – yet none of us on our own, but as part of the community of believers who follow Jesus.

And this community of believers is, of course, not just us here at St. James, but we are part of wider Church, which faces similar questions and challenges to those we are engaged with at St. James. In April of last year Bishop Stephen published a comprehensive paper inviting parishes around the diocese to 'Imagine the Future'. Over the last year the PCC has engaged with this paper both at an away day and in its meetings throughout the year.

My study leave topic focussed on the question of how a church like ours in the liturgical tradition reaches out to the wider community with the intention to provide some insights and understanding as to how best to serve God's mission at this present time.

Prayer48 was a bold and tangible outcome of the PCCs deliberations against the background of 'Imagining the future'. It proved to be a powerful experience for many who took part, and felt significant in the life of St. James.

Last Friday we had the follow-up meeting, which was attended by 25 people. Amongst others two of the questions we thought about were: what should we do now in relation to our church; and what should we do now in relation to the wider community. For each of the questions, we filled a flip-chart page. There was a strong desire to do something like it again.

At the end the question was raised 'and where will we find the resources to take this forward? And someone replied 'let's be bold' – at this moment we can't see how we are going to do this – but there is a real sense that the Holy Spirit is with us in this. 'Let's be bold'.

As we meet for our APCM today, there is much to rejoice and celebrate, but we are also facing some major challenges: we need to find someone to take on the role of Church Warden, as Chris Calladine is stepping down after four years of service; we need to find ways to increase our income after a sizable deficit in 2012 and another projected deficit for this year. We need to find new volunteers for some of our core activities.

'Let's be bold' must have been the motto of the early Church who courageously proclaimed the gospel in the face of many obstacles and real dangers to their lives, as we hear in the Acts of the Apostles and other NT writings.

Our readings this morning all reflect the reality of death in the midst of life, and the need for courage and trust.

So, for example,

The story from the Acts of the Apostles about Tabitha, a woman 'devoted to good works and acts of charity' who becomes ill and, by the sounds of it, dies rather quickly.

Understandably, her friends are very upset, and they send for Peter. I doubt they expected Peter to bring her back to life, but they were probably looking his support, assurance, and words of comfort. But Tabitha is restored to life, a sign of God's power, and Jesus' promise of life to all who choose to follow him.

The gospel reading from John's gospel has Jesus embroiled in debate with his opponents among his Jewish contemporaries, whom John just calls the Jews. They continue to ask questions about his identity – although they have seen the miracles he has worked, they have heard him teach and questioned some of the people he has healed. They refuse to believe that he is the Messiah, the son of God. Why? Because believing in Jesus would mean change – moving out of their religious comfort zones, and believing in a God who invites us to love one another as he love us, to trust and to follow Jesus no matter what the cost. For the sake of freedom and life.

As we come to our APCM today we do so as Easter people who trust in the God's presence with us; we pray for the grace to walk with faith and courage under the guidance of God's Holy Spirit, who is calling us to be generous and bold. Amen.