

Sermon: St. James Cambridge

Easter 5

18 May 2014 Start of a Stewardship Campaign

The Revd Jutta Brueck

Acts 7. 55-60

1 Peter 2.2-10

Ps. 31.1-5,15-16

John 14.1-14

At the Archdeacon's Visitation on May 7th, when the new church wardens are sworn in, Bishop Stephen announced the motto for the Diocese, which expresses the vision that has emerged from what people in the parishes have said to him in the last three years:

‘ We pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ ’.

We may not always agree with what comes from the Bishop and Diocesan Office, but this vision is one I support strongly - and I hope we all do, as it, in fact, echoes what I think we are doing here at St. James.

Nothing shows this more than our ‘Prayer48’ which is an activity which involves us being generous and visible people of Jesus Christ- both as a church and as individuals. For example, we are generous as a church by investing the money to produce the cards we distribute and the cost involved in running Prayer48. As individuals we are generous in the way we have given up our time to distribute the cards and to come and pray or welcome people during the 48 hours.

And, Prayer48 is something we do because we want to be visible - saying to the people who live in our parish - we are your local church, we want you to know that we are here, we care about you and would like to support you through our prayer for your concerns and in other ways, if we can.

Aspiring to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ - a good motto for us, as we start our annual Stewardship campaign today, when we invite all who are on our electoral roll and who attend St. James to think about our regular giving to the Church. The forms we receive are about our financial giving, but stewardship is, of course, much wider and includes the way we use our time and talents to support the mission of the Church.

When we are invited to think about stewardship and our giving to Church and other good causes, it is not a question of how many coins we have left over in our pocket or purse to put in the plate on Sunday. It's an invitation to think about what's important to us and to make choices about how we use what we have got. It's about putting our time, talents and money where our heart is, choosing to support something that helps us to live out how we want the world to be - as Christians, a place where people care for each other rooted in the knowledge of a loving God.

We live at a time when many people have no experience of faith or being part of a faith community, and if they have any knowledge of Jesus or Christianity, it is often very distorted, based on what they see on the television or may have picked up second-hand. One of the big challenges for the Church, and for us here at St. James, is to find ways of enabling people, especially children and young people to learn about Jesus and to discover the gift of faith and a relationship with God.

We may think that this is a recent development in the life of the Church, the fact that we are much more aware of the need and shared responsibility for communicating the gospel to those around us, through word and deed. And yet, when I was gathering memories for Sylvia Bailey's funeral - Sylvia was one of the founding members of St. James - I heard stories of her and others going round this new neighbourhood, telling people about this new church, a plant by St. Andrew's, Cherry Hinton. The generosity of that generation enables us to be here today, worshipping in this building with its fabulous community facilities. Our generosity is needed to meet the challenges of today, reaching out to children and young people in our community, as we are at present doing through the Good News Club and our children's workshops; caring for elderly people, especially those who are housebound, helping to promote a sense of community in this neighbourhood; being aware and generous in relation to the needs of the global world. There is much to do in God's vineyard.

At the heart of this is, of course, our understanding of God.

Last Sunday, Geoffrey preached a powerful sermon about Jesus saying 'I am the door' - the door open to everyone, at all times, and in all places, a door that offer life and love.

Today, Jesus is saying ‘ I am the way, the truth, the life ‘ - and he has shown us what that means - he is self-giving love, given for all, that we may know ourselves as children of God, loved, forgiven, free.

The first part of this morning’s gospel reading is often read at funerals, and we think of the dwelling place Jesus has gone to prepare as places where we will be with him after our death. But, we can also think of these dwelling places as having been prepared for us now - places, where Jesus is with us NOW, somewhere where we know ourselves deeply loved, forgiven, free - places where we can leave our fears behind, where we experience healing.

I guess it is something like this that brings us here, a longing and vision of the being in the world as people who are generous and self-giving, people who believe and trust in God, people from varied backgrounds and all ages, journeying together, a bit like a big family, wanting to grow in love and faith and hope for themselves and the communities in which we live and work.

Peter, in the letter we heard as our second reading, writes to the young Christian community he is concerned about saying ‘...*you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.* (NRSV 1 Pet.2.9). Do we think of ourselves in this way? That we are ‘a royal priesthood, God’s own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light? This is the backdrop against which we do our thinking and praying about Stewardship.

And, in doing so, and deciding to make a regular financial commitment in support of the mission of this Church - no matter how big or small - is a way of saying - ‘yes’ : the mission of the Church is important to me, and I want to be part of this. It may mean that I/we will have less money to buy clothes or spend on myself or to put away for a rainy day. But this is more important - this is about choosing life and saying yes - we want to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

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