

St James, Cambridge - Sermon: Dedication festival 14 June 2015: 60th Anniversary of the Dedication of St James Church
The Revd Jutta Brueck

Gen. 28.11-18, Psalm 122, 1 Peter 2.1-10, John 10.22-29

'Then Jacob woke from sleep and said 'Surely, the LORD is in this place- and I did not know it!' (Gen.28.16)

Today, we are beating the bounds of the parish to mark the 60th anniversary of St James Church, and although at the time it was a plant from St. Andrew's Cherry Hinton and didn't become a legal parish until January 1973, there was right from the start a clear understanding that St. James was the parish church for this newly developing neighbourhood.

As far as I am aware this is the first time in the history of the parish we are beating the bounds, and I am struck that we are doing this in a day and age, when perhaps the understanding and appreciation of what a Church of England parish church stands for is rather low, certainly in this part of Cambridge. We get very few requests for baptisms, weddings and even funerals from the general public, and my guess is that most people moving into the parish, streets like Bowers Croft, Kelvin Close or Ainsdale have no awareness that St. James is their parish church.

That's why in recent years we at St James have gone out of our way to let people know we are here, for example through the annual distribution of the Christmas card, through Prayer48 and also our presence in the Queen Edith Community newsletter.

Why do we take our role as a parish church seriously?

Because, in the Church of England with its parish system, our understanding of the Church flows from Jesus' own mission which was to enable all people to know God. The Church, as his body on earth, continues that mission, to make it possible for all people to find God in their lives – across the ages to this day. – (the same is true in Germany, where after the reformation the parish system was divided into Roman Catholic and Protestant regions based on the rule was 'whose the land, theirs the religion' ensuring that everyone knew which one their parish church was).

Our presence here as a parish church is to be a sign and instrument of God's presence, both through the building and through the 'living stones' – us, the people of St James, who, make up the Church in

this place. With the Bishop and the diocese,¹ we pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ. This doesn't mean that God cannot be found outside the boundaries of our Church, including people of other faiths or none. But our calling is to be an instrument of God's love and presence in our generation, a channel for God's transforming power.

The diocesan vision puts it like this:

'God calls us to discover together his transforming presence in our lives and in every community' , and encourages us 'to engage fully and courageously with the needs of our communities, locally and globally.'

We may feel some unease about the historic association of the Church of England with the mighty and powerful in this country – not surprising given that the monarch is the head of the church and bishops sit in the House of Lords-, but in our time we are much more aware that the church can **only** fulfil its calling to make God present and be an instrument of God's love if it does this through **servicing** others rather than claiming its presence as a privilege.

This presence in every part of the country goes back to the early middle ages, and has always been an expression of the church's commitment to every place, a commitment to care for everyone in the parish and to promote the flourishing of the whole community. How that has been expressed has varied over the centuries, and perhaps comes most to the fore in times of need and crisis. But, that's why everyone in a parish has the right to ask for baptism, marriage or a funeral in the parish church, and also why clergy have traditionally been involved in civic and other community forums and in all kinds of chaplaincies, not just representing the needs of Christians in the community. Those who want to restrict religion to the private realm overlook the extent to which our society and humanistic values are rooted in Christianity and the traditional presence of the Church in all realms of life. Here at St. James this gets expressed through our presence in the schools, in local nursing homes and participation in the local community forum, which was set up by a former incumbent, Hugh Dawes, in the 1990ies and which I have chaired despite the many demands on my time.

¹ The Diocesan Vision Statement: ' We pray to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ. Believing that God calls us to discover together his transforming presence in our lives and in every community, in Jesus Christ we pray: • To engage fully and courageously with the needs of our communities, locally and globally • To grow God's church by finding disciples and nurturing leaders • To deepen our commitment to God through word, worship and prayer.

In order to fulfil the our mission to 'discover together God's transforming presence in our lives and every community', God calls people like us 'to be his living stones, to let themselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.' (1 Peter 2.5) God has done so, in every generation.

We may not think of ourselves as God's holy priesthood, the chosen people through whom God continues to reveal Godself in the world, being only too aware of our imperfections, our doubts, our struggle to have faith and be faithful, amidst the many challenges of our time. And yet, God uses us, and invites is to play a particular role as the Church in this place.

In our own search for faith, for God, for healing, for transformation as individuals and a community, God is able to work through us to reach others with God's transforming love. 'Not everyone was able to glimpse God in Christ. Yes for those who did, their lives could be transformed. So with the Church.' (Alan Billings, Lost Church, P.125)²

As we are called to be the Church of England in this place today, 'to be generous and visible people of Jesus Christ', we pray to be a church that is welcoming to all, that cares about local people and the community as a whole, that offers a place and community to share the spiritual journey for anyone who is seeking, wherever they are on that journey and that equips people to live out their faith in their daily lives at home, at work, in all their relationships.

We do so with the trust that God is with us, but also the humility of knowing that God works through others, too, whether people of faith or not.

For some of us, it may feel strange and challenging to walk round the parish singing hymns and saying prayers, something of another age. But we are doing so, in the knowledge that we have the gospel of a loving, self-giving God at the heart of what we are about, and we offer ourselves in the service of that God and this community. So that God can use us and that some, through us, come to the realization, that *Surely, the LORD is in this place- and I did not know it!*

Amen.

² Cf Alan Billings, Lost Church, SPCK 2013, pp.123ff 'A theology of the Church for the Church of England