

Sermon for 11th January 2009

What am I doing at St Mary's? Have you ever asked yourself that question? It's an important question and it's not disloyal to ask it. So if you haven't asked it of yourself for a while, I'm going to give you a few minutes to ask it this morning.

You have a slip of paper with 2 questions on it. Take a few minutes to answer those questions as best you can now. If you're really stuck, there are some quotes to help your thinking on the inside of the pew sheet. Be honest with your own views, because without honesty and openness, this is a pointless exercise.

If you haven't had enough time and want to think about it more, take another slip of paper from the back of church as you leave and give it to me next time I see you.

The PCC and I have been considering this over the last few months and re-exploring what are our vision and purpose at St Mary's over the next few years, and how we're going to work towards them. So it seemed good to ask you why you think we're here, what you think our vision and our purpose are? And how we are going to get there? Because this is not something I'm going to do, or the PCC are going to do. We're in this together, we grow or decline together, we live out our faith or not together because we are the body of Christ in this place.

We heard today readings for the Baptism of Christ, and we remember that Christians are marked by our baptism as being part of the same body. We're baptised because Jesus was, as we heard in the passage from Mark. We're baptised because by this outward sign, this sacrament, we recognise that we have received the gift of the Holy Spirit. But we being the flawed images of God we are, we forget or doubt that gift. So many of us, myself included, have been taken in by the lie, propagated through misinterpretation the passage from Acts we heard earlier, that you have not received the Holy Spirit unless you can speak in tongues, or are proficient in extempore prayer, or are regularly slain in the Spirit. It's a lie and a deeply damaging one because it stops us becoming who we really are. Read Paul's letters about the gifts of the Spirit. Let me say this clearly: if you are baptised in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, you have been born again and received the gift of the Holy Spirit. God doesn't promise you a gift and then not give it. What loving parent would do that? Remember that parable about the parent giving a scorpion instead of an egg (Luke 11)? Jesus reminds us in it that God gives us gifts, though we don't deserve them, and ignore or forget them. But when we don't use the gift of the Holy Spirit, or don't even believe we have it, we don't feel the strength and comfort she's waiting to give us, or the power that comes through her presence in us.

Jesus knew that power and strength, especially as he heard these words: You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased. Those are the words God speaks to us too. You are my beloved, and with you I am well pleased. So often we find them hard to hear, I don't know why.

But we need to hear them if we're to be 24/7 Christians living out our faith in our community /office/school with people who don't know the good news. We need to know ourselves chosen by God for his work.

From my prayer, observation and conversations over the last 6 months I've feel the time is right to do something new for God here. So I'm asking for your support for a new seedling I want to plant. The PCC are considering this, but it's right that you have a chance to make your feeling know to the PCC before a decision is made. I want to begin a new worship service at St Mary's for those who are not yet Christians, or who are on the very edge of the Church. It will be very different from worship in our main service. It will be a bible-based service with teaching appropriate to the age and faith stage of its congregation; there will be worship in word, music and prayer; it will express the gospel creatively to those who are newly encountering God, all this alongside faithfulness to the Anglican tradition.

When I took up this post I made the traditional Declaration of Assent and promised before God, my bishop and all of you to proclaim the gospel afresh in this generation, to the people of Burghfield in 2009 and until I stop being your priest. St Paul in 1Cor 9 says this: To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews ... To those outside the law I became as one outside the law ... so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel.

I believe this is my calling here, and I'm asking you to support me in it, so that I and a leadership team can plant and nurture this new seedling over the next few years. It means setting aside for a while our individual reasons for being here and work together as the faithful baptised to do something new in God's name. It will be slow at first, but if we work and pray hard, it will grow. These new Christians will have the well of living faith that is here in this congregation to draw on for support and nurture, and together I hope we can grow the church in Burghfield and feel good about being part of God's work here.

There are lots of things each of us already does to live out our faith in our daily lives: wearing a cross where people can see it and then being kind and generous to others; visiting someone who's ill; going out of our way to help someone who's lost or frightened. What you do might not seem much to you but God sees it and knows what we do, and all this builds the kingdom of God and grows the church. This new seedling service, which I'd like to call Sharing Life, is part of our corporate work of growing the Kingdom here. I can't do this alone, only with your support and prayers. It will mean change; a change of time for the parish Eucharist, probably to 9.30am and 8am for the early service, but what growth happens without a little discomfort?

So talk to a PCC member (stand up) or to me today before you leave. Ask questions, and let us know whether you're prepared to change a little to be part of the deep well of Living Faith that you are that feeds this new Sharing Life seedling.

That we, the baptised, may go forward in God's name together to grow God's Kingdom in Burghfield.

Blessings,
Gill