

Vicar's Sermon

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Title : Pentecost
Author : Rev. Peter Holzapfel, St. Mary's Church, Kempsey, Worcester.
Subject : The birthday of the Church.

Next Sunday is Pentecost when we give thanks for the gift of the Holy Spirit: what Jesus called "that Spirit of Truth that leads us into all Truth". After Jesus had returned to God He sent the Holy Spirit to those first disciples that enabled them to speak out boldly about Jesus, who He was and what He had done. They had a new vision and a new power to proclaim the Gospel to all nations. But the power of the Spirit did not begin and end with those first few followers: for it is extended to us today.

We too can be filled with God's power and in fact we must be if we are to witness effectively and be as bold and forthright in sharing the Good News of Jesus for it is to this task that each of us is called.

It is not that the Spirit is dependent on us to spread the word of God for He is quite capable of doing that Himself. There was, for example, one primitive tribe living deep within the jungles of South America who had no contact with Westerners and yet when the missionaries arrived they found them already worshipping Jesus. It sounds unbelievable but why shouldn't the power of God be able to speak directly to their hearts and minds? Is this not what Jesus meant when He said that the Holy Spirit would testify about Him and that even the stones would cry out His name?

But He also made it clear that the disciples themselves, you and I, filled with the Spirit's power, would have a part to play in spreading the Gospel across the world. As St Paul said "we are co-workers with God" and one of the privileges that God gives us is that of working with Him for the salvation of mankind.

And this is something that we seriously ought to consider by asking ourselves "in what ways do I fulfil my purpose as a Christian by introducing others to Jesus? When is the last time that I introduced someone to Jesus? And by this I don't mean invited them to church but consciously and knowingly named the name of Jesus to them.

For this is why the Holy Spirit has been poured out on all flesh.

There are two things that we in the Church are not good at doing: the first is speaking of Jesus rather than God. It's rather easy to talk about God in a nebulous or abstract way but speak of Jesus and it all becomes more personal and therefore potentially rather more embarrassing. Jesus is not and was never meant to be an abstract concept but a personal Saviour.

The other tendency is to speak of Mission rather than Evangelism. Many ministers would prefer to describe their work and that of their congregations as mission in a general sense. This would include anything that you did for others that was inspired by the love that God has given you for your fellow human beings. The work of Age Concern or simply assisting a friend or neighbour in time of need would be good examples of this. And this is both good work and God's work and a very necessary part of taking God's love out into the community.

But evangelism is different in that it is a conscious attempt to invite others to consider Jesus as their Saviour and how many individuals or churches can honestly describe their work in this way? When is the last time that we were involved in a specifically evangelistic campaign?

One of the reasons we don't do it is that mission is far easier than evangelism in that there's far less risk of offending or annoying anyone. But neither do we, by playing it safe, open up opportunities for challenging anyone and getting them to seriously consider the issues of faith and belief. If we are to stop the apparent terminal decline of the Church of England then we must discover ourselves as an evangelical church.

I mentioned all this to someone the other day who replied “well, if we go down that road then we’ll put people off!” Quite so: we probably will: but how successful are we being at the moment?

Yes, it will put people off: even worse than that: Jesus said “the time will come when anyone who kills you will think that they are offering a service to God!”

In some parts of the world today this is actually true: and yet paradoxically these are the very situations in which the church is thriving and growing.

Yes, it will inevitably put some people off but, on the other hand, by naming the name of Jesus and inviting people to embrace Him as their Saviour, it might just save some people who might otherwise be lost and isn’t that worth the risk?

Amen.

Peter

Rev. Peter Holzapfel

vicar@stmaryskempsey.org.uk

www.stmaryskempsey.org.uk