

Pentecost 8 Yr A 2020.

In these interesting times in which we live it is comforting for we Christians to know that Christ is with us in whatever suffering this broken world inflicts upon us. The central message of Matthew 13 is that, despite the continuing disasters and evil events that beset the world, God's Kingdom has broken through, and that we who confess Christ as Lord are both participants and heirs of that Kingdom. The question that I often wrestle with however is how do we as a church community reflect and live out those Kingdom values? How well do I proclaim and live out the Good News?

I have been reading an old book on remodelling the church to adapt to the 21st century and it made me think about how important church community is to me; how it strengthens me for my journey and how much it keeps me honest if you like. Last Sunday was the first time that this community had gathered since well before Easter. A lot of church communities have yet to take that step and sadly a number of parish churches will never reopen. During our time apart I experienced an incredible sense of dislocation and when Father Robert recommenced services over the hill at Samford I jumped at the chance to reconnect physically with a faith community and receiving the sacrament. This physical presence is very important to me and that face to face connection and experience of accepting the body of Christ as sacrament was one that I had desperately missed. It made me think of those people who say that you don't need to attend church in order to be a Christian and reinforced for me the importance of community in giving full expression to our faith.

Christians have been gathering together since the first century to support each other in their faith journey through listening to scripture, praying together, and celebrating the Eucharist and they have often been doing so in the face of incredible adversity and persecution and continue to do so in so many countries of the world where Christians are unmercifully persecuted. When I think of those people our past and current problems pale into insignificance.

Community is central to our faith. The early Christian communities within which our Anglican tradition is rooted were monastic, comprised of a core of devoted monks and nuns around which a community gathered to serve the physical and spiritual needs of a local region. They were responsible for hospitality to the needy and destitute, healing for the sick, teaching and witnessing to Christ. After the Norman invasion these communities became focussed on establishing parishes, each with its own church and priest, and supported by the monastery, the local nobility and the local community. After Henry the Eighth these large monasteries were no more, broken up, monks scattered, and land appropriated by the Crown. What was left was the parish system and the remnant of monastic community gathered around a bishop in his church – the Cathedral – so named after the cathedra – the seat of the bishop.

It is this parochial system that we have inherited and that forms the basis of our diocesan structure. As an Archdeacon I have seen its strengths and weaknesses. I have seen parishes destroyed through petty squabbles over minor issues, ego clashes pitting group against group, people hungry for perceived power rather than devoting themselves to serving the community. I have also seen communities such as this that, to the visitor, have a sense of unity and purpose and openness. In the heyday of Christendom this system served well in fulfilling the mission of the church which is the mission of God – the proclamation of the Gospel – Good News for all humankind. In Britain where it all originated this system is progressively being dismantled in favour of a structure that is far more flexible and adaptable to the changing shape of the community within which it functions and seeks to serve.

Very soon you will be entering another phase of life as the Anglican Parish of Grovely with a new priest. I observed to Reverend Jenny before she retired that you had one of the more vibrant communities that I had encountered however you need to look to the future and how you will adapt to this new world in which we function. Some people will never return to regular worship and some churches will never reopen and that is the reality that we have to face, but above it all it gives us a chance to

reflect on our core values – those that define us as community. My friends my advice to you is to be open to change – to seek new opportunities and direction because we will never go back to the way we were.

In the midst of the turmoil of this world in which we live Jesus encourages us to live in trust and to seek harmony with our brothers and sisters, believing that we are part of God's Kingdom and that he has a plan for all of us. Jesus tells us to treasure what is important in our lives and to give up all that is hindering us in finding the fulfillment that the Kingdom of God brings. That message applies to our church as well as to each of us personally. Chapter 13 of Matthew's Gospel is devoted to Jesus' teachings about the nature of God's kingdom and the realisation of it in its entirety at the end of time but in the meantime we must live as Kingdom people remembering the words that we utter at the peace: we are the body of Christ, His Spirit is with us. This is at the very core of our faith. The Christian community, indeed the Anglican community is not defined by parish or diocesan boundaries but is global and universal. It is not defined by the here and now but also by the legacy of two thousand years of faithful witness.

Psalm 105 gives some clue as to why we gather: O give thanks to the Lord, call on his name, make known his deeds among the peoples. Sing to him, sing praises to him; tell of all his wonderful works. Glory in his holy name; let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Seek the Lord and his strength; seek his presence continually.

And finally those words of comfort that I read especially in times of grief and loss: *For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.*