

An outward looking Church – a wider horizon.

You will recall that last month I preached the first sermon on the theme of being a Healthy Church. This followed on from our survey here and Away Day and feeds into the forthcoming P.C.C. On the Away Day we looked at what makes a healthy church and ranked ourselves against a list of definitions from Robert Warren's Book, 'The Healthy Churches Handbook'. The P.C.C. discussion was very useful and I hope some practical actions will come from it, actions that will involve you all. We spent considerable time talking through how we could be outward looking concerning the village. But we did not get any further. So the next P.C.C. will address this issue and this sermon is about feeding that discussion and also widening your horizons.

Before I came to Ingatestone, I tried to find out something about the place and the people. This was quite hard for me, as to my knowledge I had only ever been here once, in 1997, driving through the village to a social event at Bishop John Perry's house for new deacons. It was quite a strained and difficult event, with John Perry ending the evening with leading everyone in singing modern choruses. If the differences in churchmanship and styles of worship and ministry had been an undercurrent, they appeared with this singing. The Church of England does strain to hold itself together! Next day at Morning Prayer with my training incumbent, he asked how I got on. I talked about the 'difficulties' of the evening and then said, "and I drove through this quaint little place. It was so quiet! At a quarter to eight in the evening there was no-one about. I could never live anywhere like that!" My training incumbent smiled and I am sure God smiled too! A word of caution, never say "never" to God! People I asked said Ingatestone was "sleepy", "stuck in the past", "not interested in the world outside the village other than to keep it out". Still I came. Sue, of course, does not live far away. I know that when the possibility arrived of her coming to join us, some people she knew were horrified. "Nothing ever happens there", "you will learn nothing there" "those people are not interested in anything outside of the village". Still she came. I am not saying that these are true perceptions of the attitudes that you have about the world. But they are perceptions held about the village and about the church. Should we do anything about it? Can we do anything about it?

One of the attitudes of an outward looking church identified by Robert Warren is being passionate and prophetic about justice and peace locally and globally. I am always amazed that some people think the church should have no interest in these issues. They simply cannot be reading the same Bible that I read. The set lectionary reading this morning is from Amos. You would find it interesting to read this small prophetic book in the Old Testament, dating from the period 790-750 B.C. Amos is a shepherd and owner of a sycamore-fig grove. Not a rich man and not part of the ruling elite. He sees nothing but complacency from God's chosen people, the people of Israel. In chapter 7 verse 7 he is comparing Israel to a wall that should be built straight and tall with a plumb-line. If they followed God's teachings, this is how they would be. The core of his message is to be found in chapter 5, verse 24, 'Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never ending stream'. We see how unpopular he was from the reading today. He says God will judge his unfaithful, disobedient, covenant breaking people. He says that those who have much have it through perverting justice and crushing the poor. Those in the two-thirds world, Africa, Asia, Latin America, look at the West and often say the same. If you look at the references to the poor in

the Old Testament, almost every reference means 'forced to be poor' or 'dispossessed'.

We only have to look at what Jesus has to say about the poor to see the significance in his teaching. There are twelve references. There are seven to rich and riches. The latter are well summed up by Luke 6:24. 'Woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort.' I was amazed that a good Christian of many years standing said to me in Totteridge over ten years ago. "Oh where Jesus says blessed are the poor and he talks about the poor, he means the poor in spirit." He had been taught that in church. How convenient is that in a wealthy suburb of London? In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5: 6 in the Good News Bible it reads, 'Happy are they who are humble, for they will receive what God has promised'. The King James' version says 'Blessed are they that hunger and do thirst for righteousness, they will be filled' and the N.I.V. is very similar. Jesus is probably alluding to Psalm 37: 11. 'The meek will inherit the land and enjoy great peace'. Here The Hebrew translated as meek could be translated as 'the dispossessed'. Care for the most vulnerable is at the heart of the Old Testament, the words of Jesus and the Christian message. Anything else is simply not being faithful to the texts. But it is never popular with those with much to loose. Amos was very unpopular. In the reading from Mark chapter 6:14-26 John the Baptist, who lived in the desert, wore goat skins, ate locusts and wild honey and preached repentance, loses his life for standing up for the ways of God and criticising the lifestyle of Herod and his entourage.

Care for the poor has always been at the heart of the God's message and of the Christian way of life. I have been in ordained ministry now for nine years. The most rewarding and enriching spiritually was my engagement with caring for homeless people in east London. Organising a congregation to run a night shelter, with myself as hands-on co-ordinator felt like real ministry. The people in the congregation who were involved really grew in faith. Yes it was hard. I was verbally abused more than once and physically threatened on one occasion. But this was ministry on the edge. We undertook it because we looked around, saw what was needed and got on with it. Of course the situation is not the same here, but I am talking of somewhere only around 20 miles away. I would have hoped that we saw the EMUs project and the potential for working with local youth as two similar projects of addressing local needs. I was appalled to find that someone said about the EMUs, 'Well why should I help them? I had no help with my children.' When I visited Milton just outside Cambridge recently, I found the local church running a similar play group project four mornings a week. They did find it hard, but people were committed to it and saw the importance of working with the young mums and their toddlers. We struggle with 10.30-12 on a Friday.

Our outward looking focus and being prophetic for justice and peace must extend beyond our shores. It is over forty years since the term 'global village' was coined. But we all know the truth that we only have to turn on our screens to see live what is happening around the world. I know people sometimes feel despair and a sense of powerlessness. This is not surprising, but we must not allow our sense of being over-awed to paralyse our need for action. I reminded us last month that it is a Biblical principle that we should make 10% of our available income available for God's work. The C. of E. recommendation is 5% to your local church and 5% to other causes worthy of your support. I know many of you find the thought of this a challenge, but

challenges in life are to be faced, not avoided. I hope that many of you give in that 5% to causes in the two-thirds world. Paying for the education of a child in these areas is less than having a daily and Sunday newspaper delivered. Paying for water holes to be dug in Malawi costs less than £20. These are just small examples. You need to see poverty to really know the reality that so much of humanity faces on a daily basis. Visiting a Palestinian refugee camp and seeing sewage floating along hand cut channels between covered areas where people lived changed my perception. So did seeing young Christian Palestinian men sitting around in villages as there was no work and no social security system for them. So did watching Palestinians just outside Bethlehem being ordered off a bus and beaten up by Israeli soldiers for no apparent reason. So did seeing mud floors in rural Romania and the conditions for patients in an Aids hospital run by Christians. Sue has told you some of her experiences in Kenya. You will hear much more.

Perhaps it is time that we as a church regularly supported a project and were known for doing so. We could have a special fund that people gave to through which we could undertake this work. We could help with the theological education of those training for the ministry in Kenya. We could sponsor a child and the Sunday school regularly hear from them and write to them. You may have numerous other ideas. If so, let a member of your P.C.C. know.

I am always hearing from people how fortunate they feel they are to live in Ingatestone. Having lived here for five years I agree. But feeling like that should not be about being smug and self-satisfied, as the people I spoke to prior to coming here interpreted it. As Christians we know who we are called to thank for our lives. Just read again today's Epistle reading, Ephesians 1. 3-14. 'And when you also were included in Christ when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation. Having believed, you were marked in him by a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.' If we take this as spoken to us, we have an obligation to be outward looking. Like the ripples in a pond, this is the corner stone of faith dropped into our lives. The ripples should reach out to those we know, our wider community and beyond.

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