

Sunday 21st February – What is the church?

Over the past few weeks the St James bookclub have been reading a book called “Being Reverend” by a vicar from Hull called Matt Woodcock. Matt is what is known as a pioneer minister. He was appointed to one of the largest, oldest and emptiest churches in the middle of Hull with a mission to revitalise things. The book is well worth a read - you may well empathise with some of the long standing members of the church there who were wary of the new ideas or you might be excited by the possibilities. The book will challenge many of your ideas about church and it will hopefully make you think about what could be done in here in Shirley – if we trust in God. Read the comments by members of the book club in the new magazine out soon – or get hold of a copy yourself.

As you are probably aware, we are using this Lent – the period from now until Easter – to think and pray about what the life of the churches in the parish should be like when we eventually emerge from Covid restrictions. For we trust that one day we will be able to be out and about again, we will be able to go to places and see people and we will be able to meet together for worship and other activities.

We have to be aware that the ‘new world’ will be different from the old. Things have changed and will still change. And how we are church and how we do church will need to change too. There will no doubt be some things from before the pandemic that we will want to pick up again; there will be some of the things adopted in the lockdown that we now see as important and to be carried forward into the future; there will be some things from the past that have served their day and that can, with thanks, be left in the past and there will be some new things, perhaps some different ways of doing things that can be taken forwards. The idea of these sermons and discussion groups is to help us begin to plan this way forwards.

So where to start? Perhaps we should begin by thinking a bit about the church. What is the church? What is the church for? Who is the church for?

What we would normally do is head back to scripture to start looking for answers. So what do we find when we look in the New Testament?

The word ‘church’ is most often found in the letters of Paul and the Acts of the Apostles. The Greek word is *ekklesia* which means a gathering of people. There is no reference of the word being used to indicate a building, or an activity like ‘going to church on Sunday’ or an institution. It is used for gatherings of people – congregations we might call them – or a collection of such gatherings. It is always used to describe the believers themselves.

In the gospels there are only a couple of references to ‘church’. The most significant is when Jesus says that Peter will be the Rock on which Jesus will build his church. Although an image of building is used, taken in conjunction with the rest of what Jesus was saying, his use of the word refers to people – and the rock is the faith and example of Peter himself. Jesus came to call people to follow him- to be his disciples or apprentices. He came to establish what he called the Kingdom of God – to help people to accept the rule and authority of God in their lives and the life of the world. He didn’t come with the prime aim

of 'establishing a church'. The church – gatherings of local people – would always be a means to the end, never the end in itself.

Today we often might think of the church as being the building, the institution or what we do on Sundays - the language we use hints at this – we call ourselves churchgoers and we refer to the building as 'the church'. But the experience of the last year has shown that those thoughts are wrong, or at the very least do not tell the whole story. We would do well to remember that for the last 12 months we have hardly been physically meeting at all; the buildings have been closed for a lot of the time and yet we have still all been part of a church that has been caring and worshipping and witnessing. The banner outside St James Church echoes this with its message that "the building may be closed, but the church is still alive and active".

So we know what the church is (and what it isn't) but what is it for? I think we have hinted at that too as we thought about Jesus' mission to call people to follow him and to establish the Kingdom of God. The church is about helping people follow Jesus and making the world a place more the way God wants it to be. This reflects what Archbishop Temple famously said *The Church exists primarily for the sake of those who are still outside it.*

So as we look forwards what should we be doing? What should we be getting involved with? Where should our priorities lie?

It seems to me that our priorities fall into three main areas and we will think briefly about each in turn – posing some questions that we can come back to in the weeks ahead. They are, in no particular order of priority,

- to encourage more people to follow Jesus.
- to help those who do follow him deepen their relationship with him – become closer followers if you like
- to help establish the Kingdom of God

You might say – where is worship in all this. Surely worship is a priority. And yes, it is, but I believe worship embraces all three - as we shall see.

So let's think first about encouraging more people to follow Jesus.

A few weeks ago Sarah preached about the call of the disciple Nathanael, and how he responded to an invitation from his friend Philip to "come and see". The gospels are full of stories of people responding to such calls and deciding to follow Jesus. Jesus tasks his disciples with the challenge to "make disciples of all nations". And yet it seems so little of the church's energies and resources are targeted towards those who have not yet made a response to follow Jesus.

Each of us at some stage in our lives – whether consciously or sub-consciously – must have made that response. The fact that churches across the country (and beyond) are reporting falling numbers shows that fewer people are making such a response today. Perhaps they are not even being given an invitation to "come and see".

Many of us would have made our response after growing up in Christian homes, being brought up within the Christian community. But I am sure we are painfully aware that many of our children and grandchildren have not made similar responses. We might wonder why that is; what could we have done that would have made a difference.

We need too to think of those who have not been brought up in church families – and who these days will have very little if any background knowledge of the Christian faith. How can we reach out to them and encourage them to consider following Jesus?

The key thing for both groups is for us to be a church that includes and welcomes, to be a church that helps people feel they belong, to be a church that is seen to be relevant in a fast changing world. It's worth remembering what Kate said in a reflection a couple of weeks back about signs - *The Church is a sign – pointing away from ourselves and our activities and towards Jesus. When people look to us, they should see Jesus. When they meet with us they should encounter Jesus – his love, his power, his offer of relationship and new life.* And this is why this moment is such a vital time to be taking a look at who we are and what we do. We are in the midst of a great change – let's ensure we make the most of it.

The second priority is about helping people – perhaps even ourselves – to become closer followers of Jesus. Our human relationships develop and deepen over time, and they can wither and die unless we work at them. Similarly, our relationship with God in Jesus needs to be alive and fresh. I suspect that for many we were given some basic instruction in the faith as we came to confirmation, but since then we have been left to ourselves a bit. Yes, there are sermons week by week, perhaps we read the Bible and other books, maybe we attend Lent groups or even a regular study group. But do we focus on knowing more about God or knowing God better?

Before Christmas we ran a “way of discipleship” course where a good number of us thought about what being a follower or apprentice of Jesus means, and how we can develop our relationship with him. I would want to encourage others to do the same – to think about how we can follow Jesus more closely. In doing so we will learn more of what he has in store for each of us and have stories to tell of the difference knowing him makes in our lives.

And the third priority is to help establish the Kingdom of God. What is this Kingdom of God we might ask? When we think of a Kingdom we probably think of a place, but it's not like that. It's about letting God take back control of our lives, it's about us living as he wants us to live and sharing that living with others. It's to do with love, justice, joy, peace, understanding, acceptance, developing potential, growth. The list can go on. It's about all the good or God things of life and the world. It's about helping the world be as God wants it to be – about the world accepting the love and authority of God.

How can we help bring it about? By being concerned about the world – locally and worldwide. By wanting to change things, by spreading the love of God not just by what we

say but by who we are and what we do. By seeking to make a difference and to be the difference.

And we can see how our worship contributes to all three priorities. Is it welcoming? Is it meaningful and helpful to those who are feeling their way in faith? Does our worship help us grow and develop our relationship with God, or is it primarily an activity where we meet our friends or a routine we go through week by week? And lastly does our worship reflect the Kingdom values of acceptance, understanding and joy?

We've raised lots of issues and asked lots of questions today. In the weeks that come we will take a good look at what our Parish is like and where we might help build the Kingdom, think about the things we have done in the past, the things we have learned through the pandemic and the opportunities that lie in front of us and begin to plan our way forwards.

I hope that you will join in the zoom conversations on Wednesday evening or Thursday afternoon as we explore these questions further – a real chance for us all to make a contribution and learn from each other. We probably won't end up doing some of the wackier things in Matt Woodcock's book, but I hope and pray that we will be open to God guiding us into new and challenging us as we look to the future.

And if you are unable to join a zoom conversation, then here are some questions to think about this week – these are the questions we will be starting with on Wednesday and Thursday. I'd love to hear your responses or your questions – please give me a ring or drop me a line.

- Try to imagine that you have only ever been “to church” for weddings and funerals. What would you make of our Sunday worship?
- How would you respond to a friend who asks you why you “go to church”?
- What do you think it might mean for us as individuals and as a church to live lives which demonstrate God's values such as welcome, generosity, justice and mercy?