

Sermon for Easter 3  
APCM Sunday 19th April 2015

I hope that you have been enjoying a glorious Eastertide. The sunshine and the general happy mood that good weather brings have for once mirrored the Festival time. I have been busy having a very bad cold, but in between Lemsips and cracking open new boxes of Kleenex, I have been mulling over some Eastery thoughts. One particular thought came from an interesting conversation I had here at St Peter's on Easter Day. (Not remarkable in itself - all the conversations I have here are fascinating!) A wonderful occasion where clearly the distribution of the Easter card (our thanks again to Alex Pridgeon and all other "post-people" for this) had encouraged many in our parish to come to share in the joy of Easter. The person I spoke to regularly attended a church of a different denomination some way from here and she had not realised that she lived in St Peter's parish or indeed that she had a parish until the card had arrived.

It seems more than likely that many people are in the same boat. This made me think about the role and purpose of a parish church. The word parish itself seems to mean something like "a place beside/place for the stranger". It is an ancient Church division which in England survived the Reformation. Everyone in England has a parish church. Nowadays it is clearly very easy not to realise this. Historically though the parish was a very important social and spiritual boundary. Social, in that when people travelled far less than they do now all the main events of life would take place in relation to the church. And if you fell sick or on hard times you would depend on being "on the parish" and care or aid of some kind would be afforded to you. If you fell into need away from home you would be sent packing back to your own parish very swiftly indeed. Spiritually, the parish church was the local expression of the Church. The whole Body of Christ. The place of spiritual nurture and communion for each and every parishioner.

This balance or twin focus of looking out and looking in - feeding the hungry and feeding the soul - is there in the Early Church from the beginning. The first Christians gathered to share a meal of remembrance of Christ's gift of himself, but they also shared that meal with the destitute in their communities. They gathered to praise God, to sing songs and to receive encouragement and teaching but they also went out to share Christ's good news and his healing power in the world.

A lot is written about this period, very little is straightforward to translate to today. It is different now. Nor is it like the days I described at the beginning, when a person's parish was his or her life. And this begs a very big question for parish churches. What are we for now? Within a few tube stops from here you can find different answers to that question. I can take you to one parish church which is indistinguishable from a community centre cum coffee bar. The whole feel and purpose of the place is that of active social engagement and service. A stone's throw away I can take to a gilded treasure box of a church open every day for prayer and the celebration of the Eucharist. Look closer though and you will see the Daily Prayer that underpins and sustains the Coffee Church. Look closer and you will see the ministry of reconciliation and healing offered to those on the streets around the Treasure Box.

The truth is of course that there is always a tension between what a church is and what a church does. It is tension that can be creatively and imaginatively grasped or one that can stifle us. The problem, the challenge, the joy is that the church is to be both a place of refreshment and renewal for those who do attend and a place of refuge and support for those who don't. In the old saying, "the Church is the only club that exists for the benefit of those who are not its members."

So we are for what we have always been for, despite the changes of time and culture. A parish church is the physical and living expression of Christ with us, because it is made up of individual Christians answering God's personal call to each of us to live and work collectively for his kingdom. This is not a job on the rota this is our life's work. What we receive on our Sundays needs to be spent on our Mondays. And our parish church, our beautiful St Peter's, is the place where we receive our nourishment, our strength for the task. The place we shall hear that Jesus loves us and died for us and the place we can allow God to show his love for us, where we can take stock for a moment of what it means to us first before we go out again to share it with others. This place like the old parish model is big enough to send us out into the world in his name and small enough to hold us close when that going is hard.

Nothing can matter more. For this reason please don't rush off today. Please come through to the hall, have a drink and something to eat. Look at your APCM reports and hear not just what we do, but what you are being offered in all that we are.

Amen

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