

Trinity 5 – the ideal church
St James, Colwall, 4th July 2010

In many ways, the sending out of the 70 disciples in our gospel reading marks the foundation of the church. This was the first time the disciples preached the gospel without Jesus being with them. It is interesting to speculate what that gospel was: something about the coming of the kingdom I expect, but whatever it was they went into the surrounding villages in the clothes they stood up in, relying on the hospitality of whoever they met, and healing the sick. And they came back jubilant with success. Let's fast forward 2000 years to an incident three or four weeks ago when the presiding Bishop of the Episcopal church of the USA who had been invited to Southwark Cathedral was asked to remove her mitre in case it might offend any male sensitivities. This was one of those occasions which make me despair of the Church of England. The contrast between the first disciples going out to preach the gospel with these richly clad prelates quarrelling about what hat to wear is, to quote Bishop Katharine, "beyond bizarre". If the Episcopal church had a branch over here I would be very inclined to join it in exasperation.

But this made me ask myself what would the ideal church be like today? We are thinking of drawing up a strategic plan for the next five years so this is quite a good question to ask ourselves at this time. Would an ideal church have a building? The first disciples didn't and think how much better it would be if we didn't have to maintain this great building. Well, I suppose we can't really manage without a building but I must admit I do envy the Free Church in Colwall with a relatively modern one right in the centre of the village. And I guess we do need the space from time to time and there is the issue of the history of the building, so we can't really knock it down. It is part of the village and we are not free to do with it as we would like. So we are constrained by history and we can't undo 2,000 years of it, but that is no reason why we should be constrained in the gospel we preach. Every building tells a story and what this building should tell is the story of Jesus. It should say something about God and about our relationship to God. And it should say those things to the modern generation which is not necessarily familiar with all the symbols that we have in the church and who tend to regard churches as interesting museums. So, as you go into the church each time ask yourself what is the impression it makes upon you and what is the impression it would make upon a stranger. And then think not what would make it more comfortable or brighter, but what would convey the presence of God and what would tell the story of the gospel.

If we did that to make the building more like an ideal church, we should not stop there. What about the services? Are they fit for purpose? What kind of message do these robes convey? Are the words of the service understandable? Are the hymns meaningful to modern people? But perhaps most important of all, does the congregation believe in them? The atmosphere in a church service speaks louder than words. Are we saying things by rote or do we really mean them? It is so easy to recite the words of the services which we know almost by heart without thinking about what they really mean, or how someone not used to them might understand them. We are thinking of introducing more seasonal variations into the standard services, which I think will help, but we need to come afresh to each service, as if we were hearing it for the first time..

So we can improve the services and do our best with the buildings but the really important thing is the people. The ideal church cannot be made up of ideal people, which would be a bit too much to ask, but at least the lives of those people should reflect the gospel exactly as the services and the buildings should. The first disciples

were ordinary people, fishermen and labourers for the most part, but what made them a church was that they had encountered Jesus and could tell other people about him. So we have to ask ourselves what do we know about Jesus and why we think he is important for people today. And I think this is the key issue in forming an ideal church: people should think it is important. It is not that people are antipathetic to the church so much as that they think the church is irrelevant to their everyday life. And I guess the incident with the mitres simply confirms most people in their belief that the church is out of touch with the real world.

However the gospel has much to offer to the present day world which must surely be looking at an uncertain future. It is not that the gospel removes the uncertainty but rather that it puts the uncertainties into an eternal perspective. Some things, like England leaving the World Cup, may be just trivial and in the light of the gospel, can be seen to be. Other things are more threatening but people who have trust in God should be, and should be seen to be, much more resilient. Being a member of the ideal church should show in our lives. It should show in our relations with each other and in our openness to the world. It should show in the goals we set, the ambitions we have and the ideals we follow. You all know the sermon on the Mount. If we follow that we will not go unnoticed.

Well, we all know how difficult that is but we are starting from a very imperfect position. I used to think that the current divisions in the church were really about marginal issues, namely the position of women in the church and homosexuality. But fundamentally these are issues which are important to people's everyday lives. The position of women in the world really is an important issue in this country as elsewhere. Some men do find it difficult to work for a woman and many women find it difficult to meet all the expectations placed upon them. Now I could wish the church would give a lead here by affirming women's ministry and leadership, which it is just about ready to do having decided to consecrate women bishops. Unfortunately some parts of the church have difficulty with this, based on their interpretation of some verses in the New Testament and the two archbishops have been trying to find a form of words which would keep them happy. I wish them luck! I don't think division of the church would be a good thing because it polarises the issue – the two divisions would tend to define themselves by what separated them rather than what united them, namely the gospel. It is so very easy in the church to concentrate on issues of order rather than the presentation of the gospel to the outside world.

The same issue of authority lies at the heart of divisions about homosexuality, although I must say I think that there is prejudice operating here too. But here I would say that the church has been lacking in its guidance on sexuality in general. We have not made it clear what sexuality is for and how it could operate within our culture. It is not homosexuality as such which is a problem, as extremes of behaviour which are found in both heterosexuals and homosexuals. While trying to patch over the division in the church we have been missing an opportunity to present a view of sexuality which was informed by the gospel. And surely this is a tremendously relevant thing to do.

Well, I never said that being an ideal church was easy but that does not mean that we should not try. It seems to me to be even harder in these times than it was for the first disciples. But the principles remain the same. Let me end with these words by Paul from the Epistle when he was faced with a similar problem to what we have today.

For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything! As for those who will follow this rule – peace be upon them, and mercy and upon the Israel of God.