

Sunday 3rd March 2019
The Church in the week – looking outwards

Psalm 105:1-6
Romans 10: 9-15
Matthew 28: 16-20

Some of you will know that Paul and I celebrated our Wedding Anniversary last week. Nineteen years. Getting married in 2000 means it's easy to remember how many!

And when we got married we had 5 children between us – Paul's three ranging from 18 down to 12, and my two who were 14 and 9. We lived in a little railway cottage in Bentley Heath – Hannah and Mickey lived with us and the other three came alternate weekends. It was a bit of a squash when they all came, but we managed OK.

But as you can imagine, with a houseful of teenagers, it wasn't long before girlfriends and boyfriends started appearing – and then fiancés and wives (and a husband) and grandchildren.

So from the 5 initially, we now have 17 (5+5+7) – not to mention the very special friends we have also kind of adopted into the family – Rachel, our children's "best friends", parents of the children-in-law. In fact, in a sense, since Paul and I don't have any shared children, you could say all our family is "adopted" into one family.

Our family has grown. And it has grown through love. Lots of different kinds of love – married love, parental love, love of friends – but all through love.

Over recent weeks we have been talking a lot about church – about church not as the building or the institution or the local organisation – but church as the people of God.

Another way of describing it, is the church as the family of God. And the natural way of families, is that they grow, and expand. Our family has long grown out of the little railway cottage, and even the massive vicarage was a bit of a squash over Christmas!

And it's set to get even bigger – the good news is that my younger son and his wife are now getting excited about the birth of their first baby, in the next 4-8 weeks or

so. (Almost as excited as I am!) So that will be 18 – and I suspect it won't be long before we are sharing Good News about my older son and his wife!

Good news for our family

So, I wonder –what is the best news you have had this week? {share}

We have a real desire to share Good News – things that bring us joy, things that we think will bring joy to others

Psalm 105

Sing praise

Tell of what the Lord has done

Good news

Gen Synod – share the joy of knowing Jesus 1 min each

“What a buzz of hope in the room”

Good news

Old spiritual practice of taking time each day not only to bring to God the things that have gone wrong, the things that hurt, for forgiveness and restoration

But also

The things that we are grateful for. The glimpses of God in our every day lives

Let's do that now. Not aloud – just think. Where have you had a glimpse of God in the past week?

[wait]

Me

- Springtime/taking Dad outside the hospital – reminder of resurrection. That God is still and always in the business of making things new, of fresh starts, of new welcomes, of hope.
- Stuck with sermon. Bible reading/commentary – everything just falling into place...
- Cards and best wishes, love and support – glimpse of God from the people of God.

So we have Good News to share – glimpses of of God we see every day, the trusths of God which we know in our lives....

Good News of the God who is alive, who is as close as breathing, who walks with us through the lows and highs of every day life. Good news of God who loves us ‘come what may’; of Jesus who came to live, die and rise again to demonstrate and open the way back to that love; and of the Spirit, who lives within us, strengthens us, and assures us that it is all true.

We have Good News – that this means we are adopted into God’s family. A little bit like Paul’s and my family has been built up through relationships of love, God’s family is built up through the relationships between God and those who turn to him. This is what St Paul is saying in the first part of the reading from Romans which we had this morning. Being adopted into God’s family (being “saved” in St Paul’s language) is about believing that God raised Jesus from the dead (and all that that signifies) and publically declaring that Jesus is Lord (ie comes first and ahead of everything and everyone else).

We have Good News – that in a world beset by hate and disunity, God’s family offers love and community;
That being part of God’s family takes us from “me, me, me” to “we all matter”;
From competition to collaboration;
From “survival of the fittest/loudest”, to fulfilling lives for everyone.
That being part of God’s family offers hope.

And that this is not a fluffy, pie in the sky when you die sort of hope, but a bedrock on which we can build our lives, and from where we can find the strength to face, challenge and respond to what we experience day by day.

And Good News that this Good news is for everyone. That we are all made in God’s image, that no-one is beyond redemption, that the invitation to be part of God’s family is for everyone who is willing to accept it.

I’m sure we are all familiar with Pentecost at the beginning of Acts 2.
End of that chapter - early church
Shared lives, worshipping God, eating together
God added to their number *those whom He was saving....*
God’s work, God’s mission – to extend his family
As Gospel reading makes clear, we have a part to play
“go and make disciples....”

Yes – but how.....

We rightly have an aversion to what is known as “Bible bashing” - trying to frighten people into the family

So – when did that ever work (shotgun weddings anyone?)

Try this instead

Luke’s version (24:46-48)

Jesus told them, ‘This is what is written: the Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. **You are witnesses of these things.**

“Tell people what you have experienced.....”

1 Peter 3:15

“...in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect....”

“Tell people what you have experienced, in an appropriate way at an appropriate time”

So what does this look like?

[Please see picture on next page]

God in the centre.

People nearer or further away,

People facing towards God,

sideways,

away from God

People moving

Closer

Further

Round in circles!



So we can use this idea in several ways

Thinking back to last week, it's a really interesting concept regarding the growth of our own relationships with God – because some are further away, but facing God and moving forwards, and others maybe closer to God but sitting down, pointing away and with their hands over their ears.

As we approach Lent, it's an interesting exercise for each of us to think about where we are on the picture.....

But just now I want to think about it in terms of sharing the Good News. What we are trying to do, when we are thinking about reaching out to others, is to find ways to help people to re-orientate and to move closer

Not to get people “over the line” (there is no line), but to play our part in helping them to have more openness to – a deeper relationship with - God

Church as the people of God has a massive role to play here
Remember – not joining the club, but joining the family

And I very briefly want to think about four things

Prayer

Presence

Proclamation, and

Persuasion

First, Pray

Prayer always comes first. This is God's work, not ours.

If we try to do it in our own strength we will not be able to.

It is God's job/ the Holy Spirit's job to "convert" people, to change their hearts

We have to do our bit – love, act, speak – but the outcome is God's job.

What we are doing when we are praying is asking, yes, but also listening

Going back to the picture - aligning ourselves with what God wants us to do

Then – Presence

The things we do that show our community that the family of God is present and active in their midst.

And lots of this is as much about who we *are* as what we *do*.

As a Parish we have lots of presence and engagement. We do lots of things,

I guess the question is

Are they all as outwards facing as they could be? Do we use them in that way? Do they all point towards Jesus as much as they could?

How can we tweak them so they are more "intentional"?

And by that I mean keeping in mind the "why" behind what we do

Why were people attracted to Jesus?

Love, compassion, justice and mercy, acceptance, hope

As the Spirit of God makes us more like Jesus then we too begin to display these characteristics more and more

So it's not just about people being attracted to us, it's about us then pointing people to the source of this love – often by someone "up front" but sometimes by our words – not forced, but not avoided either. Being the "witnesses" that we talked about earlier.

We have lots of opportunities already. So how can we better use our presence to help to turn people a little more towards God?

We've looked at Prayer
Presence

So thirdly - Proclamation – or you might prefer “Presentation”
Setting out the Good News and what it means and why it is “Good News”; and inviting people to find out more. What St Paul is talking about in the second part of this morning's NT reading - “how can they believe if they haven't heard? How can they hear unless someone tells them?”

It might be at a

Special event

Special church service

Any church service!

In our picture - the “what next” stepping stone to help someone move closer.

Some people have a real gift for speaking about the Good News and inviting people to explore further (St Paul springs to mind). Not all of us have this gift, but we can all invite people to come along and hear someone else.....

A few will come, and a few of those will want to find out more, which leads on to

The fourth component - persuasion

Not as in “the hard sell”, but giving people an opportunity to explore further.

A chance to find out more, through some sort of “enquirer group”.

A chance for people to really get their heads and their hearts around God's invitation and what it means for them

A chance to reflect on what it means to say “Jesus is Lord” of my life, to count the cost, and to make a decision. In our picture, being turned towards God and moving towards him.

To be adopted into the family of God.

So we've thought about church as the family of God

We've thought about the Good News that God is always wanting to adopt more people into his family.

We have thought about this picture, this idea that people can be turned towards or away from God, and be moving closer, round in circles or further away.

And we have thought about some of the things we can do to help people to move into a closer relationship with God. About being examples, witnesses, inviters.....

So, to finish....

This is not a Sunday-only job. This is the calling and work of the church, the family of God, throughout the week, Sunday to Saturday, week in week out. It is God's work – and he offers us the great privilege of joining in it with him. And as the final words of Matthew's Gospel tell us, we will not do it alone.....

And Jesus came and said to them, “.....Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

“I am with you always, to the end of the age”

And that really is, Good News