

## Pentecost 2009

Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14 p868, Acts 2 vv 1-21 p1093, Romans 8 vv 22-27 p1135, John 15 v26 – 16 v15 p1083

The red stole I am wearing today was made for me at my ordination by the lady who ran the youth group I attended in my late teens. She was a Pentecostal by denomination and it seemed appropriate that she should make the red stole worn on this day and generally for feasts of the Holy Spirit and for the Blood of Jesus and His holy martyrs. A few weeks ago I felt very honoured to be asked to take her funeral at Blackburn. Although it is always a sad thing to lose a friend, there is nevertheless a deep joy in conducting a funeral in the sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life. I confess that, when I take funerals, there are some people I am more confident about having gone to the right place than others. What one looks for is a lively faith, manifest in good works, but *only God knoweth the number of his elect*. Today's sermon is based on the address I gave at Jessie Butcher's funeral.

The first point was that she thought it important to run a Christian youth group at all. Proverbs 22 v6: *Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, he will not depart from it*. Since Old Testament times it has been recognised that it is the responsibility of every generation to pass on the faith to its children: Who God is, what He has done for us, what we owe to Him. For all sorts of reasons, our generation is failing to pass on its faith to our children. We need more Jessie Butchers, parents committed to bringing up their children in the *fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his name*, people willing to be Sunday school teachers and Christian youth leaders, and people prepared to share their faith with any children and young people for whom they have a responsibility. But this group was not just for Jessie's own family and people who were already Christians. There was a welcome for everyone. Hospitality is one of the great Christian virtues. Those of us who went were encouraged to bring our friends. There was enough laughter and love for everybody. Jesus told us to share the faith with the whole world. You start sharing with loving. Although, it was a group for teenagers, we also attracted younger children and adults. There is no limit to Christian fellowship. We may have our own ideas about mission strategies and what we ought to lay on for which people in the expectation of certain results. But we always have to be flexible and open to God. It is God's Church, not ours, God's mission, not ours. It says in Acts: *And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved*.

We received a lot of excellent teaching. The basis was always the Bible. Both Old and New Testaments are the inspired Word of God. They bear witness to Jesus, God's Word made flesh. Nearly 2,000 years ago the Christian thinker Origen taught that, when we read the Bible, the Word of God is reaching out from its pages seeking us, just as we are seeking Jesus as we search the Scriptures. *The word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart*. We ought to read the Bible faithfully and frequently. Our lives as individuals should be based on the Bible and so should the faith and activities of the Church. Indeed a church that wasn't Bible-based could hardly be properly described as a church. The Church of England itself teaches the same thing. Our sixth Article of Religion has it: *Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation*. On Bible Sunday we pray, *Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy*

*Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.*

We were not only a mixed group age wise. We belonged to all sorts of different denominations of the Christian Church. That didn't matter. As Christians, we are members one of another, members of the Body of Christ, whether we are Pentecostals, Adventists, Baptists, Anglicans or Roman Catholics. We seek to agree in the truth of the Gospel. Where we differ, we differ in love as members of the same family. The art is to have a humble, but firm confidence in what we believe and to respect other Christians and what they believe and not to close our minds to the possibility that they might be right. We and they are inspired by the same Holy Spirit!

Our evenings were far from all study. We worshipped. We sang a lot – many hymns and choruses not all that familiar to me from the Church of England. But they were all based in the Word of God in the Bible – as all good hymns are. Those of us who use prayers, books and liturgies formally authorised by the Church will find that they too are firmly based in the Bible. If they were not, there would always be the risk that they were departing from the Truth of God revealed in Jesus Christ – another point made very firmly in the early Church 1800 years ago. We are most truly ourselves as human beings when we are worshipping. We were made for the glory of God. Truly, our greatest joy is to worship. The eternal joy of heaven is worship and our worship on earth is hugely valuable in itself and is also a foretaste and a pledge of the worship of heaven. I thought it was particularly appropriate at the funeral that we sang one of the hymns we used to sing in that club at Rainham Mark thirty years ago.

When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,  
And the morning breaks eternal, bright and fair;  
When the saved of earth shall gather over on the other shore,  
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.

Worship offered authentically on earth in anticipation of worship in Heaven.

I mentioned this last week at Halling and said, why then all these empty seats? Why don't people want, above all things, to immerse themselves in the public worship of the Church? And the answer is original sin. I said at Halling, last week, that it is like going to the seaside. A few brave souls are having a wonderful time in the sea while a much greater number are staying on the beach. *It's too cold. I don't want to get my hair wet. I look too fat in a bathing costume.* They're missing all the fun and they won't listen when those of us already in the sea shout, *Come on in. The water's lovely.* But we are meant to swim in the ocean of God's love and it is tragic that people are held back by the hardness of their own hearts. It isn't really like the Sunday School outing to Margate. It's more like when all those little turtles hatch out on the beach and have to make it into the sea. If they get stuck on the beach, they will die of starvation or get eaten by predators. Their natural element is the water and that is where they will be safe, where they will find nourishment and where they will grow into the turtles God made them to be. We human beings are made to swim in the

ocean of God's love. It is the only place we can be saved, the only place we receive nourishment, the only place where we can grow into the people God means us to be. Baby turtles have an instinct that draws them to the sea. Human beings are instinctively drawn to God, but our natural instincts are perverted and stifled by the insistent demands of self. And that is why so many of us choose to remain on the beach, unable to develop our potential and always in danger.

One of the disconcerting things about going to Mrs Butcher's on a Friday evening was that she was prone to announcing that we were having a special guest speaker. Then that speaker would turn out to be you, only it was the first you had heard of it. Mrs Butcher certainly honed my preaching skills. St Peter tells Christians: *be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear*. Jesus tells us that when we are persecuted: *take no thought beforehand what ye shall speak, neither do ye premeditate: but whatsoever shall be given you in that hour, that speak ye, for it is not ye that speak, but the Holy Ghost*.

Mrs Butcher encouraged all of us, young and old, all very different people, to make use of the gifts God has given us. God has made us all members of Christ's Body, the Church. Each one of us has gifts and, if we do not use them, the Church is that much the poorer, and a poor Church is that much less use to the world and to the God Who made the world.

I spoke about the importance of hospitality. Jessie Butcher formed the idea that we should keep the feasts mentioned in the Bible: Passover, Weeks (or Pentecost) and Tabernacles. There was always a table groaning under the weight of good food. Wine for the older members. Telling the Bible story of the events commemorated at the feasts in an atmosphere of laughter and fun, love and praise. Who God is, what He has done for us, what we owe to Him. Participating in festivals is a way in which communities both express their identity and develop that identity. We are the Easter people. We celebrate together. Our national identity as a Christian country has slid simultaneously with our downgrading of the Christian feasts in our national life.

What has happened to our community festivals as Christians? We've separated the (bank) holiday from the holy day at Whitsun. Church is seen as an optional extra in the festival of consumption which is the secular Christmas. People are too tied up in holiday events to come to church on the holy day of Easter. The weekly community celebration on Sundays has become a low priority even for many who call themselves Christians. So we don't mark what God has done for us. We don't participate. We don't celebrate our identity as the people of God. And the result is that we have a feeble Church, which can barely sustain itself, let alone fulfil its God-given mission to the world.

What was affirmed in Jessie Butcher's teenage youth group was that church is joyful and loving. It is about belonging, belonging to Christ and to one another. It is about personal development. It is about keeping the faith and passing it on. It is about growing the Church in stature and number. It is about welcome and hospitality, sound teaching and effective preaching. The Church is the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.