

The Importance of Mission

I don't know about you, but I sometimes worry about the smallness of our congregations at St Michael's and St John's. So many people in Halling and Cuxton do not seem to be terribly interested in the Christian faith. Those who are interested see no reason to come to Church week after week. This is worrying because it makes us wonder whether the Church in Cuxton and Halling is sustainable. There have been churches in these two villages for at least a thousand years, but, for the last 30 years, they have had to share an incumbent. What does the future hold? More mergers and closures? Someone put it to me the other day. What if we had to share with another parish and I could not provide a service of Holy Communion every Sunday in every Church for which I was responsible? That would be tragic. The Sunday Eucharist is the heartbeat of the Christian community and is the foundation of that Church's mission to and on behalf of the whole parish.

Too few people means that there are not enough hands to get the jobs done. There is not enough money to pay the bills. Why should the Church of England provide a priest for places where the real support for the Church comes only from a very few people? This worries us because we love these two churches and we would be very sad to see either or both of them closed or reduced to an empty shell in which services were held only once or twice a month in rotation with three or four other villages. It could happen if there are not enough Christians in Cuxton and Halling to sustain our worship, or if the Christians think they can manage very well without the Church except for a few special occasions in their lives. We perhaps panic a bit and wonder how we are going to get more people in order to keep going.

This may be a little selfish on our part and could, to some extent, explain our failure to attract people. We are looking at it from our own point of view, what we want to maintain, and how we can rope others in to help maintain it. What we want to maintain is not a bad thing. It is God's Church. It is a very precious thing and must be maintained and I thank you heartily for the huge efforts that some of you make to maintain it. But it is God's Church not ours. These things have to be seen from His point of view, not ours. It may not seem terribly attractive to people if they feel they are being asked to shore up a sagging institution, or if they feel they are being invited to join a club of people whose perspectives and priorities they basically do not share. We find ourselves almost disguising our faith, playing down what Church is really about, in order to attract new members who will help us to keep the Church going. This procedure is not entirely honest and, even if it works to the extent of bringing people in, it is doomed to failure. Either people feel conned when they realise they have joined a Church rather than a religious social club and leave (unless of course they convert), or else the appearance of a Church survives by effectively becoming a religious social club. The Church is the Body of Christ, commissioned with completing Christ's mission to the world. If we aspire to anything less, we are letting Jesus down, we are letting ourselves down and we are letting the world down.

So what other ways are there to look at sharing our faith, other than the rather depressing one of finding a few more people to keep the place going for a few more years?

I am sure we do not put enough emphasis on God. Are you and I here today primarily to please God, to glorify Him, to worship Him, to adore Him? That is what worship is, an

offering to God. This is the spirit in which to come weekly to Church (weekly with two ees not weakly with an a). We come, I hope, in the Holy Spirit.

If so, our hearts are filled with joy in our public worship, we can only be totally committed and we can have no doubts about our future security, because God is our guarantor. It is worth pondering these words we use week by week, *It is our duty and our joy*. Think about that. Worship is not a joyless duty. Neither is it vapid, selfish exaltation. Duty and joy are two sides of the same coin when we worship Him whose service is perfect freedom.

When you fall in love, you want to shout it from the housetops. When something really good has happened in your life, you really want to share it with everyone. When you experience something truly good, you want to share that experience. So it should be with mission. You and I are in love with God, I hope. Let's tell the world. He's done wonderful things for us. Let's share the Good News. Knowing God, singing His praises, reading the Bible, praying, receiving Holy Communion – these are amazing experiences. Surely we want to share them, not play them down, when we encourage other people to come to Church and to share them too.

When you are really excited about something you want to tell other people about it whether they want to know about it or not. That is how it should be with God – the most exciting thing in our lives, if we may call Him a thing, the best thing Who has ever happened to us, if you like.

Then there is the idea of glorifying God. Surely we want God to be glorified. We want Him to have worshippers, lots and lots of them. When you invite your friends to come and support your football team, it might be because you want to give them a good day out, it might even be because your team is in such a dire state that, without a few more supporters, it is likely to go bankrupt, but the main reason for asking them is because you think your team ought to be supported, whether they are top of the Premier League or just a few lads from the village. You think they are worthy of supporters. If you believe in God, surely you think He is worthy of worshippers – lots and lots of worshippers, far more worshippers than the incredible worldwide television audience which is likely to tune in to the World Cup this year. Dare I suggest that you should be no less fanatical about God than the most ardent football fan following the England team? It seems ironic that we shall see thousands of beaming faces painted with the cross of St George – the red blood of a Christian martyr spilt on a white Roman pavement – while the Church, purchased by the Blood shed on the Cross of Calvary, keeps itself to itself and embarrasses no-one by an excess of enthusiasm. Maybe we should be the ones with our arms round the shoulders of complete strangers, singing songs of hope and triumph and telling them that they're our best mates and we really love them. Christians ought to be able to sing and fall in love without the need for 12 pints of strong lager. Of course, in the past, the Church's fanatics have shared the darker side of the football fan's enthusiasm – the partisan spirit, the taunts and the violence against those who are not true believers, religious thugs calling themselves Christians. We have rightly recoiled in horror from that kind of commitment, but have we recoiled from all commitment and enthusiasm?

The glory of God is a good reason for filling the Church. What other reasons are there? Remember that old Acronym J.O.Y., joy, Jesus first, others second, yourself last. We've thought about the glory of Jesus. I don't want yet to get on to helping us to maintain the place. What comes in between? Others! People would be much better off for knowing God. To know God is to have eternal life. We've sometimes given the impression that being a Christian is about giving up a lot of pleasures in this life, and perhaps undertaking a number of unpleasant duties, in the hope of going to Heaven when we die, the alternative being to enjoy yourself in this life and then to fry eternally. This is an appalling caricature of Christianity and it doesn't even work these days. People either don't believe there is an afterlife or else they believe that there is and that God is far too nice not to supply a place in Heaven for them and their loved ones. No wonder people don't come to Church if they think it is only about making them miserable for the doubtful hope of Heaven.

I hope you and I know better. The things God asks us to give up – sins – are harmful things. They hurt us and they hurt other people. God doesn't tell us not to steal, murder or commit adultery because He wants to spoil our fun. Transgressing God's commandments ultimately ruins lives – ours and those of the other people on whom our lives impact. It is the Devil's lie which equates sin with harmless fun. In the same way, a life lived dutifully is a much more satisfying one than a life lived selfishly. Christian life is real life.

We might invite people to support Arsenal because Arsenal are great, but supporting Arsenal is unlikely to make them better people or give them fuller lives. We invite people to worship God because God is great and worshipping God will make them better people with more fulfilling lives. Supporting Arsenal might even be part of that Christian's fulfilled life – so long as he doesn't watch football when he ought to be in Church.

The world needs Christians. Jesus calls us lights of the world, the salt of the earth, the leaven that turns dough into bread. People living God's way makes this earth a better place. The more people who follow the Maker's instructions, the better the world works. Christians try to live by the commandments which prohibit dishonesty, violence and infidelity. They try to provide for the poor and the sick. They seek to influence the countries in which they live for good. Christians stand for justice and mercy by word and example. The world is a better place if the Church is strong and faithful to her Lord.

Jesus first; Others second. What about the third letter Y, yourselves, ourselves, as a motive for mission? How are we going to get a few more people to put a bit more money in the plate, clear out the gutters and start a youth club? Strangely enough, I think if we get the first two right – mission to glorify Jesus, mission because we really care that other people should know Him, we shall find that all those practical problems have taken care of themselves.

And what if there are not enough people in Halling and Cuxton sufficiently committed to loving the LORD their God with all their heart and their neighbour as themselves to sustain a worshipping community, a Christian community committed to serving the wider community? In that case, maybe our existing buildings, personnel and organisation ought to collapse and make room for a new missionary Church filled with enthusiasm to believe, live and proclaim the Gospel, but I am sure that we can be that community if we will allow the Holy Spirit to have His own way in our Church and our hearts.