

Sermon - 2nd Mark of Mission: teach, baptise, nurture new believers

Based on Luke 11.37-41 and Acts 11.1-18

Building communities of faith

- During these seven Sundays, starting from Pentecost Sunday five weeks ago, we have been skipping through the Acts of the Apostles, and picking up from the stories of the first apostles and early church communities how they enacted what today the worldwide Anglican Communion calls the Five Marks of Mission.
- Although we have been hopping along through the book of Acts sequentially, the particular marks of mission our selected stories have been highlighting have not been in the sequence of the Five Marks.
- So today, we are engaging with the Second Mark of Mission: to teach, baptise and nurture new believers.
- Or, as our ABM study book suggests: to build welcoming, transforming communities of faith.
- The suggestion is that once there is a nucleus of believers who are intentional about continuing Christ's ministry, that they will help extend to others Christ's invitation to live lives transformed by God's grace.
- This invitation will lead to
 - being taught about the way of Christ,
 - being baptised into the resurrection of Christ, and
 - being nurtured to a mature faith in Christ.

Getting the order right - or not

- A quick comment about the order of teach, baptise, and nurture new believers presented in the wording of this mark of mission: there have been various debates about what the sequence should be.
- Although the order given here - first teach, then baptise, then nurture - makes rational sense, experience has shown that we do not need to limit how the Spirit works according to one fixed approach.
- Indeed, in the original story of Peter's dream and encounter with Gentiles from Caesarea from Acts chapter 10, that he then summarises in today's reading from chapter 11, they first experience baptism by the Holy Spirit, and only afterwards does Peter baptise them with water.
- Because God's ways are not limited to the way that we think they should work!

Becoming responsible for one's own learning and maturing

- The second quick comment I want to make about the notion of teaching, baptising, and nurturing new believers, is that there is in this mission-centric approach the understanding that this is focused on *new* believers.
- But the teaching and nurturing does not - or should not - stop there.
- Indeed, one of the signs that the teaching and nurturing of a new believer has been successful is that they then start taking responsibility themselves for their ongoing learning and maturing.
- This should make obvious sense if we use the following very appropriate analogy:
 - When our children were born, my wife and I nurtured them and taught them how to live.
 - We knew we had been successful in this because in due course they became independent of us.
 - Their ongoing learning and maturing hasn't stopped: it is continuing, but they have taken responsibility for this themselves.
- Likewise, part of our own faith maturity is each of us being responsible for our own ongoing faith development and maturation - using sermons, books, other Christians, bible studies, and our own prayer life with God to do so.

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Ritual cleanliness according to Jesus

- I am now going to comment briefly on the fundamental concept of ritual cleanliness that Jesus engages with in the Gospel reading.
- One of the cultural habits developed by the Israelites, and codified in scriptural regulations, was the notion of physical cleanliness.
- In our current time of having to deal with the coronavirus pandemic, we have an increased awareness of the need to wash our hands frequently, and to practise a much greater degree of cleanliness and sanitation.
- Well, it appears that during their time of being built and established as a nation, the Hebrew people likewise learnt to wash hands and utensils, and to avoid certain foods or combination of foods for sanitary or moral reasons.
- And this became associated with being presentable for worship, for engaging with God.
- It's the same kind of mindset people have when they feel it is only right and proper to attend church services wearing one's Sunday best - sort of 'looking good for God' - not in a hypocritical way, but as a way of genuinely honouring God.
- The version of this that Jesus encountered was the idea of being ritually clean, with the focus on the letter of the law in terms of one's outward presentation.
- The problem is that, like people who focus only on '*looking good for God*' instead of *being good*, in the same way the Pharisees were vulnerable to being hypocritical, and promoting hypocrisy.
- And this is what Jesus calls the Pharisee out on.
- Jesus says, in effect: 'You are so focused on the outward appearance that you overlook what you are like inside.'
- And he ends by saying: '*So give for alms those things that are within; and see, everything will be clean for you.*' (NRSV Luke 11.41)
- To '*give alms*' means to give for the benefit of others at one's own cost.
- And '*the things that are within*' are best explained by the fruits of the Spirit that Paul's lists in Galatians 5.22-23:
'love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.' (NRSV)
- So Jesus is effectively saying that when we enact the fruits of the Spirit for the benefit of others, then it is *this* that will make people ritually clean - and therefore able to engage with God - rather than the ritual washing of hands.
- I can't help thinking that these days Jesus would encourage us to be sensible and wash our hands, and would do the same himself, and that in this story he possibly did not wash his hands on purpose, in order to provoke the conversation.

Peter and the Gentile dilemma

- This leads us on to Peter's divinely inspired dream, where he is confronted by symbols of ritual uncleanliness.
- Peter is a good Jew, and he makes a point of complying with expected religious observances.
- And, as a Jew, if he went into a Gentile home, he would then be ritually unclean, and therefore not in an appropriate state to enter into God's presence - even by himself, under his own prayer shawl.
- By allowing himself to become ritually unclean, he would have effectively been cutting himself off from God until he purified himself appropriately.

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- So this was a confronting situation for Peter: he was wanting to do the right thing by God, according to his religious tradition, and yet - while praying - he had some kind of waking dream in which he had a repeated divine instruction: *“What God has made clean, you must not call profane.”*
- When some Gentiles arrive, Peter is given a strong sense - which he attributes to the prompting of God’s Spirit - that he should accept their invitation to go to Caesarea.
- He is encouraged in this by six fellow Jewish Christians who go with him.
- So he enters the house, discovers that God’s Spirit has already been at work with the man there, named Cornelius, and that many of Cornelius’ family and friends have gathered to hear Peter speak.
- Peter shares the story of Jesus with them, and the next moment the Holy Spirit’s baptism is made manifest amongst the crowd of Gentiles gathered there - and Peter is fortunately able to recognise this for what it was.

God’s solution

- And, as he says to the church back in Jerusalem:
‘I remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit.” If then God gave them the same gift that he gave us when we believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could hinder God?’ (NRSV Acts 11.16-17)
- For the early church this was a significant revelation, because until then they had been focusing on teaching, baptising, and nurturing new believers from amongst their own communities - the Jews.
- They had been focusing on their own kind - on people like them.
- So often when church communities want to evangelise and share the Good News of Jesus, they focus on people who are already like themselves - people who they think will fit in, who will have the same kind of community culture that those church communities have themselves.
- And yet, through these stories from the Book of Acts, we are shown that even though these experiences and revelations were indeed challenging and discomfiting at times - when the early Christians were prepared to pray, to listen and discern, and to be guided by the Holy Spirit, they were able to fulfil the great Commission of Jesus in ways that they had not foreseen.
- When Jesus said: *‘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.’ (NRSV Matthew 28.19-20)*, they had not expected that ‘all nations’ literally meant all people of all nations, rather than just Jews from all nations.
- The same thinking applies to each church community today, and likewise to ours here at St John’s.
- Of course it’s more comfortable for us to reach out to and welcome people like ourselves into our church community.
- However, when we engage seriously with God’s Spirit, we might find that God is already preparing the way for people who are different from us to want to hear about what we have to share, and perhaps join in with the blessings God has given us.

Praying for confirmation of our Mission Action Team’s discernment

- And to bring today’s sermon to a conclusion, this is coincidentally where our own Mission Action Team are right now: we are engaging seriously with God’s Spirit, asking for confirmation of what we are discerning God is calling our parish to attend to.
- In the same way that Peter had ongoing confirmation that he was indeed discerning the will of God rightly, I will end now by praying for this same confirmation:

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Let us pray.

Heavenly Father, as you spoke to Peter in a dream,
not just once, but three times,
and through your Spirit helped him to work through the challenge of his cultural limitations
so that he could share your Son with those who were hungry for you,
likewise confirm for our Mission Action Team what we are discerning,
in who it is that we, as a parish, need to focus on sharing Jesus with at this time.
We pray for this confirmation by your Spirit,
through your Son Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.