

## **Stewardship Sunday 2/4 – Theme: Service**

### **Address by Fr Jeremy Davies at Evensong**

*This homily is an approximation of what was preached on Sunday 21 May at Evensong. The original homily was preached from the heart.*

I wish to place Tracey's words about service within the wider context of the how we see ourselves as "Church." The word "church" does not describe the building but the people in it, the *ecclesia*, the people of God at prayer and at service to the world. Naturally our understanding of "church" has changed over the millennia. Going back to its earliest description we read " All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved." (Acts 2:44-7)

The question I ask when I consider this passage of scripture is, who outside of this small community was aware of what was going on in the homes of these new Christians? Surely the answer is very few at least initially. Inspired with the love of the Holy Spirit these new Christians came together to pray and break bread, i.e. share in the Eucharist, which then translated into mutual service and a reaching out the wider community. This may be an idealised version of what it was really like but it is none the less exemplary for that. The Church *did* grow, and rapidly too. Soon they had to find larger meeting spaces which they called 'churches' which themselves became ever bigger and more magnificent. Eventually the Church entered what historians call a "triumphalist" age. Massive gothic cathedrals and churches designed to imitate the portals of heaven matched by triumphalist liturgy, vestments, music and so on. Our choir gave us a flavour of that just now in the setting of the Magnificat - it was truly... long - and magnificent!

And alongside the grand churches, music and elaborate liturgy there were the church institutions, the school and hospitals and other religious foundations, all supported by a Church that was at the service of the whole community. The Church exemplified the model of the city built on the hilltop (Matthew 5: 14-16), a beacon of glory at the heart of public life. Service was synonymous with Church.

But then we suffered the catastrophe of two world wars. The subsequent decline in faith and with it church attendance was largely attributable to the dissolution felt by the trauma of appalling suffering and death. The Church Triumphant looked out of place in worn torn Europe. And as the numbers declined so the state took increasing control of the great arenas of Christian service, notably education and health.

We look at ourselves now and ask how can we be “church” today in a society that has taken over and arguably improved our service sector? Look at our own hospital, once proudly serving the sick from within the context of Christian faith, now one of five hospitals with a secular Trust with a huge portfolio. And when it comes to charitable giving, the secular world seems better at that too. When I watch the BBC’s Children in Need Appeal I’m staggered at how people rally to the cause and raise such huge sums of money while also having a great time. Charitable giving in the church seems paltry by comparison. Our society doesn’t need us. The Church is irreverent. We can believe in God if we must, go to church if we want, but leave service to the professionals.

But society does need us. The Church is not just something to be bolted onto society, an optional extra for those who have a personal belief in God. That is how secularists would have us behave but to that agenda a triumphalist model of Church no longer makes sense. The “city built on a hilltop” is now dwarfed by skyscrapers housing international banks and other financial services, not churches. When this church was built in 1123 it must have been the tallest building around. Now, when you look for it for the first time, you invariably find yourself wandering round and around trying to find it. But this image of the church, hidden within the city, is a model that maybe better answers those who question our existence. Jesus not only describes the Church as a city on hill but as “leaven” in the dough (e.g. Matthew 13:33), the unseen raising agent that gives life, lightness and pleasure to what otherwise feels heavy, burdensome and ultimately joyless. Here is a model that I think works best in today’s world.

We are leaven when first we recognise God is already working in the hearts and minds of all people, of faith and no faith. We are reminded of this in our first reading this evening. When Zachariah prophesies the return of the Jewish people to Jerusalem from all corners of the earth (Zachariah 8:7-8), he is implicitly acknowledging the benevolence of the foreign Persian King, Cyrus, who allowed the Jews to return from exile and rebuild their temple. Cyrus and his successor Darius stand for all those of different faiths and none. Through the eyes of faith we see God at work in and through them all and not only should we applaud it, we should take part, each of us fulfilling our Christian vocation to be Christ to others in all areas of life. The yeast is drawn into all areas of the dough as it is kneaded by God, a process that can be exhausting. We should be unafraid of being the leaven at home, in school, in the workplace, down at the pub or gym, preaching the gospel everywhere and if necessary, using words (St Francis of Assisi).

But we will never be leaven unless we are first a people of prayer, coming together as a community of prayer in this place, in this now hidden part of the city where we break Bread, sing our hymns and feast on the Word of God. Our service to the world begins here, in the way we serve one

another as an extension of our liturgical celebrations. Tracey has given a wonderful example of how we do this, an opportunity I hope we will all respond to with generous hearts.

One final point. I know we all get exercised about the numbers, especially the number of people in church and the amount of money in the collection plate. But we should not worry about the numbers. Rather let us concentrate on faith and action, good liturgy and active service. Get these right and the numbers grow, not through our own efforts but through the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through us.

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There is no better way to sum up our lives of service than in the Prayer of Teresa of Avila (1515–1582)

Christ has no body now on earth but yours;

no hands but yours;

no feet but yours.

Yours are the eyes through which the compassion of Christ must look out on the world.

Yours are the feet with which He is to go about doing good.

Yours are the hands with which He is to bless His people.