

3rd Sunday before Lent

Deuteronomy 30. 15 - end; 1 Corinthians 3. 1 - 9; Matthew 5. 21 - 37

“The best of times and the worst of times - what is driving our church?”

‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way.’ Not my words but those of Charles Dickens at the opening of ‘A Tale of Two Cities’ but how appropriate for today. To say that we live in unsettling times must a gross understatement.

Turning from one nineteenth- century author to another, next weekend I have been invited to Edinburgh to speak to the Thomas Carlyle Society on ‘Faith and Belief in the Nineteenth Century’. One of the most influential voices in this country in the Victorian period, the Scotsman Thomas Carlyle, is little heard of today. His writings are notoriously difficult to read, and he seems to have had a vocabulary all of his own. Yet, in his prime, he was considered to be the greatest prophetic voice

to the nation as he delivered his judgements on the state of the country. His influence on the writers, artist, politicians and thinkers of his day was enormous.

A deeply religious man from a strict Presbyterian and Calvinist background, Thomas Carlyle likened himself to John the Baptist. However many of the young men of those days who were initially challenged by his early utterances later became disillusioned leading one of them to say, 'Carlyle led out into the desert and left us there.' In other words he identified the problems facing society but failed to provide the solutions.

The media likes to use the expression "post this and post that". We are 'post Obama'. We are not yet 'post Brexit', although it now seems certain that we will be very soon. And we here at St Andrew's are 'post Robert Jenkins'.

Now I am not suggesting that Robert was like Carlyle in that he has led us into the desert and left us there. Far from it. But inevitably there is a sense of being cut loose, of being on our own, even of a sort of bereavement as we face the future at St Andrew's church.

The two most influential preachers of the eighteenth century were George Whitfield and John Wesley. Although they were contemporaries of each other, and both were greatly used by God, they differed widely in theology, personality, and how they organised their ministries. During his lifetime Whitfield preached over 18,000 sermons averaging ten a week. His preaching tours in America stimulated the Great Awakening. However today his name is not as well known as Wesley.

Wesley, like Whitfield, was a great preacher but he was also an organiser. He created an organisational structure to fulfil his purpose that far outlasted his lifetime - the Methodist Church.

In our New Testament reading today Paul writes to the early Christians at Corinth to rebuke them for behaving as children when it came to leadership. Some were saying 'I follow Paul' and others were saying 'I follow Apollos.'" But Paul quickly reminds them that both he and Apollos were only servants. No one personality should dominate. Together they were members of the Body of Christ. Within that Body some have will particular ministry gifts but none is more important than the others. At the end of the day, Paul writes, 'For we are fellow workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.'

Paul reminds the church that we are all called to a variety of purposes – Paul, the preacher, the evangelist, planted the seed; Apollos the teacher and pastor watered it – but, in the end it is God who makes it grow. And so it is for us here at St Andrew’s. We need to work with God and be led by the Holy Spirit and no more so than during the current interregnum – or vacancy as we must now call it.

In other words, we are all in this together and each of us has our own unique part to play. God calls each one of us to be a member of his family. Following Christ is not just a matter of believing – it also includes belonging. The Christian life is not a solo act. We are meant to live in relationship with each other.

St Andrew’s church is not its Rector, or any of the ordained or lay ministries, or, dare I say it at this moment, our esteemed Churchwardens! No, we are together the Body of Christ and that body must continue to function as we look ahead to the next chapter in our 900 year old story here in Cobham.

One of the problems experienced by some churches is that they speak too much of their leaders and too little of the Body of Christ. Many churches become well known because of a talented or strong leader

who perhaps has a ministry wider than the local community. This is found of course in some of the large mega churches of the USA with their 'tele-evangelists'. Of course, strong and gifted leadership is essential but such leadership must be exercised within the context of the whole church. As Paul wrote, 'We are fellow workers in God's service'.

This is an exciting time for us here at St Andrew's. I'm a firm believer that the glass is half full – not half empty as we continue to build upon Robert's remarkable and fruitful ministry here spanning thirteen years and shape our church for the times in which we live and for the generation to follow us.

We have an excellent team ministry. A youth work that has been transformed over recent years. A wonderful choir and talented musicians. The ingredients and the resources are all here and we are in a good place to move ahead.

You will know that our Diocese has issued a document 'Transforming Church, Transforming Lives'. The vision set out in that document will help lead discussion when our PCC gathers later this month for its 'Vision Day'.

Today you will have been given a short questionnaire “Who Are We?” This is a Congregational survey produced by the Diocese to give a broad profile of who is coming to which services in a parish. This will be another part of the puzzle which will enable our PCC to reflect on who our church family is and who comes to which services? Michael will refer to this again during the notices.

Here at St Andrew’s we do have a mission statement, ‘To Know, Glorify & Make Christ Known’. But how are we actually going to do that?

I have just been reading a book ‘The Purpose Driven Church’. The subtitle is ‘Growth Without Compromising Your Message & Mission.’ I found particularly helpful a section headed ‘What Drives Your Church’ as it seemed to me to express some of the questions facing us now as we together prayerfully seek to produce a Parish Profile to present to those who might feel a calling to the position of Rector at St Andrew’s.

There are five examples of what might drive a church. These are:

1. Churches driven by finances.
2. Churches driven by programmes.
3. Churches driven by buildings.
4. Churches driven by events.

5. Churches driven by seekers.

I am not suggesting that any of these five areas are wrong or that one is more important than the others. We need **Finances** but the danger is in asking “How much will it cost?” rather than what God is asking us to do.

Programmes are important whether they be the youth work, our faith and social action; music and worship and so on. But if we are not careful the programme becomes the driver – to be continued at all costs.

Then there are **Buildings**. Winston Churchill once said ‘We shape our buildings, and then they shape us.’ Paying for and maintaining the buildings can become the biggest budget item. This church was shaped by the Tractarian movement of the 19th century and that has to a degree shaped our worship here. Perhaps we should be thinking about new shapes for the present day but that is a debate for another day and another place!

If you look at the calendar of an **Event**-driven church, you might get the impression that the goal of the church is to keep people busy. But a church may be busy without having a clear purpose for what it does. We need to ask, “What is the purpose behind each of those activities.”

Finally there are churches driven by **Seekers**. As we attempt to reach unbelievers for Christ and be relevant in today's culture, we can allow the needs of those who do not know Christ to become our driving force. Of course God's purpose for his church is evangelism – but not to the exclusion of his other purposes. We need to be seeker sensitive but not seeker driven.

So can we prayerfully hold all these areas in our thoughts and deliberations as we enter our interregnum?

Strong churches are built on purpose. By focussing equally on all five of the areas I have referred to our church can develop the healthy balance that makes lasting growth possible. In Proverbs 19:21 we read, "Many are the plans in a man's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails."

The last time I was in the pulpit here, instead of preaching, I read through a statement by the theologian John Peck who died last year. What he wrote is remarkably relevant to us at St Andrew's today.

As you leave the church today and deposit your questionnaire, please pick up a copy of his vision. Take it, read it, pray over it. Perhaps God

will use it to help us together shape a purpose driven church here at St Andrew's. Remember also to pray for our churchwardens and the PCC.

Strong churches are not built on programmes, personalities, or gimmicks. They are built on the eternal purposes of God. A friend of mine used to say, "Constant change is here to stay." However there does remain one certainty for us – and it is that it is God's purposes that will last for ever.