

7th Sunday of Easter

Acts 1.15-17,21-26; 1 John 5.9-13; John 17.6-19.

“What Sort Of Church Are We”

Most weeks I try to listen to “Sunday”, the BBC Radio 4 religious news and current affairs programme broadcast on Sunday mornings. This is usually when I am eating my breakfast. As I listened last Sunday I found myself choking on my toast and marmalade when I heard this statement:

“The culture of Thy Kingdom Come is that of transatlantic Evangelicalism filtered through the public-school system, HTB, New Wine, and the other familiar networks. This is a heritage familiar to both our Archbishops. It will soon simply *be* the Church of England, thanks in part to the mixture of innocence and gullibility which characterises its appeal.”

The speaker was the Revd Angela Tilby, Canon Emeritus of Christ Church, Oxford, an eminent speaker and preacher in the Church of England.

“Thy Kingdom Come” is a call to prayer from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York for the period between Ascension Day and Pentecost. We are being encouraged to commit to pray for five people that we know. There is a helpful leaflet about this for you to take away.

Having recovered from my choking fit, I was then disturbed to hear what Angela Tilby said next:

“What, after all, could possibly be wrong with a wave of prayer from Ascension to Pentecost? I shall join in, as I have for the past two years. I shall be praying for an escape from the Evangelical takeover of the Church.”

Is there really an “Evangelical takeover” and if so does it matter?

The Revd. Tilby continued:

“The marketing of Thy Kingdom Come has been clever. It includes a bit of social gospel to attract the left-wing; it uses the word “novena” to impress the Catholics; and it has colonised the days between Ascension and Pentecost to please the liturgically minded. But the underlying theology remains that of individuals’ letting Jesus into their hearts and lives one by one. There is nothing wrong with that, of course; but it worries me that the Church of England is being driven by the assumption that there is simply no other way of speaking of the Christian faith.”

Was this an attack on the Evangelical wing of the Church of England? Is the Revd Tilby seeking to undermine her “bosses” – the Archbishops of Canterbury and York?

Well, probably not. But I was saddened by what appeared to be her attempt to trivialise some of the actions taken by some churches, including St Andrew's, in an attempt to make known the Good News of Jesus in a contemporary and meaningful way which relates to Society today. Some accuse us of being "Happy Clappy". It is unfortunate that this is used in an offensive and derogatory sense. However, I always turn it around and say that I would rather be happy and sometimes clap in the hymns than be miserable and feel unable to express my joy in worship!

Angela Tilby concluded:

"The abandonment of traditional religion, with its respect for privacy and the slow nurturing of the person through unconsciously memorised texts and gentle counsel, has left a hole in the heart of society which is too deep for words."

Now I don't have a problem with a respect for privacy and the "slow nurturing" of a person's faith. She is right in saying that there is "a hole in the heart of society which is too deep for words." However, I am not sure whether "unconsciously memorised texts and gentle counsel" is enough.

Down through the course of the history of the Christian church it has been men and women with a very real deep, personal, faith who have made their mark in history. They will have had a conversion experience – whether dramatically like Saul on the Damascus Road or perhaps more

subtly like John Wesley, an Anglican clergyman, whose heart was “strangely warmed” as he heard someone preaching from the book of Romans. (Incidentally there was a programme on Radio 4 this morning about names in which the broadcaster mentioned how God calls us by name – it is a unique and special thing and not dependant on whether we feel worthy.)

Returning to the call of those whose have made a mark in history (and those who have not) - the key is that a time came when their faith became real, meaningful and, above all, a personal experience. This is why I was uncomfortable about Angela Tilby’s words.

We are told that we live in a post Christian, secular society. That being so the church is called to action to make Christ known. An army cannot go to war comprised of people who never “signed up” for conflict.

There is a theme to our readings this week. In the Gospel reading Jesus prays for his disciples. The “world” of which he speaks is a place where people don’t share the disciples’ faith. As well as praying for their protection he also sends them out into that world to share the truth they have found.

In Acts we heard about the choosing another disciple to replace Judas who had betrayed Jesus. The person chosen must have followed

Jesus from his baptism to his ascension, be a witness to the resurrection, and be able to testify to the truth he declared.

Finally, in 1 John, it is the community listening to that letter being read out, who would find that believing in Jesus is the glue that binds them together. John reminds them that belief in the Son gives them eternal life and ensures they have God's testimony written on their hearts.

The common link is a challenge to think about where we belong, and whether our lives testify to the truth of the gospel and are helping to transform the world.

We seem to be afraid of the word "evangelical". There are connotations of mega church and tele-evangelists asking you to put your hand in your pocket for your money so that God will bless you. However, that is a parody of what it is all about. We are by very definition "evangelical" if we are proclaiming the good news of Jesus's death on the cross and his resurrection. Talking to Charleen yesterday, she reminded me that we are a mission church. Jesus gave his disciples, and that includes us, a command to go into all the world to preach the good news. Our vision here at St Andrew's is "To Know, Glorify & Make Christ Known".

I return to the question I asked as I commenced speaking to you. "What sort of Church are we – here at St Andrew's." The PCC and a smaller drafting group have prayerfully struggled over answering that in

the Parish Profile we have had to prepare in our attempts to find a new Incumbent. What is our identity at St Andrew's? How do others see us?

I hope that the answer about what sort of Church are we, might be found in what we have heard from our Bible readings today. In the words of an old hymn, "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea." It is a call that demands a response. It may be sudden. It may be over a period of time. But whatever, a response is required.

Back to Angela Tilby – for the last time!

"Too often in church, people in distress are patronised by the saved and the certain, infantilised by a *faux* inclusivity that has them playing with tea lights and cutting out little paper flames, while they are jollied along to find Jesus over (excellent) coffee."

Whilst I sincerely trust that we never "patronise" those who are in distress, surely we should be offering them a place of certainty and assurance, in a very uncertain and unstable world, which comes from reaching out to Christ and allowing him to be Lord of our lives.

No one can make you become a Christian. It's about God calling us, our response as individuals, and a personal step of faith – perhaps the first of many. Let's pause and watch a short film clip of our Archbishop Justin Welby sharing how he came to faith.

May we be encouraged to think of those whom we might pray for and then commit to bring them to God. But before we do that let's pause now and ask ourselves if we have made that commitment for ourselves so that we can then be strong and effective in praying and working for "Thy Kingdom Come".

Amen.