

Building community

Feast of St James the Great 2019

Luke 5:1-11

The parish banner represents a rather improbable scene. It shows a man dressed in as a first century Palestinian clothing standing in the middle of Galloway Lane, outside this church, built in 1959. Of course, the most interesting art tends to depict improbable scenes. That's what being creative is about. Art aims to prompt a creative response. I think we can assume the man is St James. According to Marks Gospel (1:19) he was a fisherman when he was called by Jesus. Luke chapter 5 gives us rather more detail. In fact he gives us a mini parable. Jesus urges Simon Peter to go out into the lake and pay out his nets. Simon Peter is rather grouchy and tells him they been working hard all night and caught nothing. Rather reluctantly he does as Jesus tells him and to his surprise they catch so many fish that the nets begin to tear and the boats are filled to sinking point. Jesus rather famously tells Simon Peter rather that from now on it will be people he will catch in his nets. (Luke 5:10) This begs lots of questions: what is the net? Who are being caught in the net? What does it mean to be caught in this net?

One very common interpretation is that it means 'bums on seats'. And I have to acknowledge that we as a parish have adopted this interpretation to some extent. One of our aims for the year 2022 is:

half our worshipping community will be under fifty years old
and a quarter below twenty-five years old.

I think it is fair to say that we want to achieve this by bringing in new younger people rather than culling the older ones! But it's pretty plain from reading the gospels that Jesus didn't mean this. He was not very interested in the life of the synagogue, although he was part of it; he knew nothing of church congregations, let alone buildings. But he did talk a great deal about the 'kingdom of heaven' and the 'kingdom of God' - Matthews Gospel prefers 'heaven' and Luke's Gospel prefers 'God'. Early on in his ministry he defined his role as being to proclaim 'the good news of the kingdom of God' (Luke 4:43); in the Sermon on the Mount he proclaimed that the kingdom of God

belonged to those who were poor (Luke 6:20); he prophesied that some of his contemporaries would 'not taste death' before they had seen the kingdom of God (Luke 9:27); he taught his disciples to pray that Gods kingdom might come (Luke:11); he engaged in conversation with the Pharisees about when the kingdom of God might come and taught that 'the Kingdom of God is in the midst of you' (Luke 17:20). he told the religious leaders of his time, 'Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.'

So the kingdom of God is an extraordinary mixed metaphor! It's on its way; it's in the midst of us; it's something we can possess; it's something we can enter. That ambiguity is absolutely typical of Jesus's teaching. Ordinary usage suggests that a kingdom is a geographical area, or perhaps more likely a people; and the kingdom of God will be a people ruled over by God himself. So the net is to bring all men and women into the community of people who are subject to Gods rule.

Rarely in Christian history has there ever been any suggestion that the kingdom of God is in any way an alternative to human kingdoms. The earliest Christians, following the example of St Paul, we are very keen to assert their loyalty to the Roman Empire. But they held a kind of dual citizenship as it were. They were citizens of the kingdom of God alongside being citizens of the Roman Empire. For much of the time there was no conflict; but even that most loyal Roman citizen, St Paul, was martyred by the Empire he loved; and a generation later, as the Book of Revelation was being written, Christians were being systematically persecuted by the Emperor.

But for most of the last two thousand years in Europe, the Christian faith has been officially supported, even established, by most national governments. We have had a remarkably favoured position. That privilege is coming to an end, in part because there are other religions amongst us but more significantly because the consensus of British opinion is that religious faith is a personal and private matter. The state defends the right to religious faith but to no longer attempts to sponsor or even support it.

So the kingdom of God is people; the kingdom of God is a community; the kingdom of God is a community with particular values which may or may not be the same as the rest of society. At the heart of those values is love. Jesus taught it when told a scribe, 'you must love the lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and with all your strength. The second commandment is this you must love your neighbour as yourself; there is no commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:31). St Paul taught it when he wrote to the Romans, 'all the other commandments that there are are summed up in the single phrase "you must love your neighbour as yourself." Romans 13:9. St John put it in very practical terms: 'anyone who says I love God and hates his brother is a liar since whoever does not love the brother he can see cannot love God whom he has not seen. (John 4:20)

So it seems that the kingdom of God is a community based on love; perhaps the banner of St James calls us to build a community based on love.

We don't say we're going to do that in our vision for the year 2022. But we do imply it. Our vision for older people is

There will be a social activity on church premises five days of the week, run either by the congregation or an outside agency, suitable for older people

I think we have achieved this!

Our vision for the hall is:

Our income from lettings will have doubled in real terms to £13000 (at 2016 prices)

I think we have achieved this! We may have expressed it in financial terms but the bottom line is that the community is being far more active in our hall than it was two or three years ago.

Our vision for the church building itself is:

The church will have space within it that can easily and comfortably be used by community organizations.

We haven't achieved the 'easily' or the 'comfortably' yet but space in this building is being used by community groups - for example, on any other Thursday night there would be a yoga group in the South Aisle.

What we can offer this community is not money, for we have a little of that, nor energy, for the congregation is skewed towards the more elderly; but we have a tremendous building and we are using it to build up a sense of community in a geographical area which has very little of it. So on Wednesday morning people taking part in a group run by a local GP surgery drink coffee with those of us who have celebrated the Eucharist: we rub shoulders with people doing yoga, or encouraging each other to lose weight, or taking part in tai chi. And of course we are getting to know some of our Muslim neighbours. We had not anticipated that, but since we are offering our premises to the whole community and since the Muslim people have no mosque in this community, perhaps it should be no surprise.

So perhaps we are building the kingdom of God with Hillfoot Surgery and Muslims! Somehow I don't think Jesus would have been surprised. So does that mean that our beliefs in the Holy Trinity, the incarnation, the death and resurrection of Jesus, are all put on hold as we work with people of all religions and those of none? No it doesn't. Our respective beliefs matter. But the most important religious belief is that love is at the heart of God. We must begin by loving one another and once we are doing this the foundations have been laid for sharing our other beliefs. And sharing our beliefs in love means being honest about who we are and leading leaving the rest to God. If we build a community of love we will have fulfilled the most basic commandment.

N Clews
25th July 2019