

Visitation charge 2019

Deut.10:12-end

Col.3 :12-17

On May 1st, we said a rowdy and glorious farewell to our Area Bishop, Andrew, who has loved us, guided us, accompanied and encouraged us over the past 8 years. It was a service which was poignant, sad, but also full of celebration. And I think it was a service which recalled us to our own calling. So this evening, I want to think a little about

Who we are and what we are we here for

We are the people of God in Berkshire. Not all the people of God, but a significant subset of the whole people of God, the body of Christ. We are chosen. That doesn't make us particularly special, but it marks us as both holy and beloved, as the letter to the Colossians reminds us.

As people who are chosen, we are to clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience; to bear with one another, to forgive one another, and to make the love of God which is within us the interface between us and everything and every person we come into contact with. These things are said to all of us. And tonight, they are said in particular to those of you who have taken on the role of churchwarden in your local church.

Together we form Church. Although "church" has come to mean a building or organization, the original Greek ekklesia meant "a gathering, assembly" and that's the basis for our word "congregation." Of course church is not just when we are gathered, but also when we are dispersed.

Arguably, the holiest moment of the Eucharist is the moment when God's people—strengthened by preaching and sacrament—go out of the church door into the world to be the church, the Body of Christ - his eyes, and voice, and hands and feet - in every single place, encounter, conversation, action, relationship we are engaged in, every hour of each day. If the life of the church when it is gathered is not equipping and strengthening us to do that, then it is missing its calling. And if we, as the dispersed people of God are not being Christ in and to the world, then we are missing ours.

Our diocesan Common Vision is about being a more Christ-like Church **for the sake of God's world**. That's what it says on the tin. And inside the tin are the three words, contemplative, compassionate and courageous, which answer the question 'and how are we to do that?'

The Church when it is gathered can be sublime - as it was on May 1st - with wonderful music and singing, preaching, symbolism (I particularly enjoyed the umbrellino!). But it is also a bunch of ordinary human beings working within a human-made structure with a messy history and an uncertain future, and currently, it's operating under challenging circumstances. You will know about this from your local context. And its not only the challenge of keeping the doors open so that the gospel can be preached to the faithful.

We are several generations away from Christendom being the operating system of our nation or our continent. We are several generations away from religious literacy being a normal part of our education and upbringing. In our little patch of the world, here in Northern Europe, people in general, in the culture we live in, have for several generations now been peddled a bunch of lies, which are centred on the idea that you don't need God, or faith, or even hope, if you've got stuff.

These are, in the main, the values of our world. Our most striking human identity culturally is as consumers, people who get and spend. Our economic system is based on this identity. Our online experience is shot through with it. Our daily lives are in danger of being completely dominated by it.

As a society, we are not encouraged to take any kind of long view, or work towards any goal which does not promise immediate satisfaction. Even the pressing urgencies of climate change, which are themselves consequent on several hundred years of getting and spending, can't make themselves heard above the noise of millions of human beings grabbing immediate satisfaction. We are even prepared to treat other people as objects for consumption to service our vision of the self as sovereign and to see our own wants as paramount needs.

So how can the church, which peddles hope, not lies, point beyond getting and spending. How can it influence or challenge the zeitgeist of the age? How can it even survive? It doesn't seem awfully likely. And at times it can feel like a weary journey, a forlorn voice in a secular wilderness.

Even in our churches, we sometimes have an attitude of scarcity rather than abundance, of demand rather than gift, of anxious subsistence in a precarious present rather than a trustful journey towards the unexpected promise of the future. Where is the hope in all of this?

Well, the hope lies in another vision. It's a vision which is grounded in a man, bleeding on a cross. At his feet, a group of weeping women, who loved him and had the courage to show their allegiance to him in public, and a single man who, it was said, was his closest friend. The lowest, most hopeless point of their existence. The man hung for a few hours of agony, and then let go of life. There was a moment of cosmic darkness as evil threatened to overcome and envelop the world and it continued through the longest Saturday ever. A day of despair, devoid of meaning. A day of hopelessness, grief, emptiness and trauma replayed again and again.

But on Sunday, as dawn broke, the impenetrable darkness was displaced forever by a light so incandescent, so complete that nothing could stand in its way. Life was renewed, reaffirmed, and hope danced once more through Creation, and it has never stopped dancing since.

And how did all that happen? It happened because our Creator God is a God of Love, and has showed us beyond all doubt that Love will ultimately overcome all that is not Love. Love shows us how to live. Love clothes us and binds us together with all created things. Love is gracious and kind, bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things and never ends.

So our hope is the presence of God in every moment - the difficult and embattled and weary ones as well as the glorious ones. Hope is in the human faces and stories made holy by the presence of Christ with us, transforming everything around us from mortal scarcity to endless abundance. Hope is in the unexpected encounter, the life of Christ springing up just where we weren't looking. Hope is in the longing of the human spirit for the things of God, even in a culture where people don't know how to name this longing.

Hope is in the light of the world which shines in the darkness and is not overcome by it. Hope is in the reality that the purposes of God are bigger than the plans we make, and more unexpected than even the most strategic predictions we can supply. Hope is in the presence of God to transform and revive situations which look like dead ends. Hope is in the ingenuity of human beings working together to value their neighbours as precious and God given. Hope is in the honouring of the whole of creation as gift.

And we are people of hope, Easter people. We are the people of God gathered and dispersed, brought in and sent out. That is who we are. And that is what we are about.

The melody is the same - it is God's enduring melody of love. The harmonies we each weave around it will be different. Sometimes there will be dissonance, and your role as churchwardens is often to work with the dissonance and weave it back into the tune; to conduct the players, encouraging them, re-tuning them, helping them to listen to each other and to work together to make something beautiful to play to

the world, in the best of the tradition which you have inherited, and with the fire of the Holy Spirit within it.

It is often difficult and costly work. It is often very rewarding. It is usually done alongside the more prosaic work of maintenance and form filling. It is a key part of the engine which keeps our church humming along and which enables us to go out and be Christ in and to a desperate world.

Thank you for all that you do. Thank you again. Amen.