

Sermon preached on January 23 2011

We are to be a new community of transformation and love

“Jesus was walking by the sea of Galilee when he saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew.....Jesus said to them “come with me.....” (Matt 4 18/19)

Last Sunday in John’s gospel we met Simon Peter and today he makes his first appearance in Matthew’s gospel. We learnt that he was Simon son of John whom Jesus renamed Peter, Cephas, Rock. Today he is called with his brother Andrew to follow, that is to become a disciple, which entails taking on a new identity and in his case a new name. It is a name that is aspirational, and he frequently falls short of Jesus’ vision that he should be a rock, but ultimately that is what we celebrate about him, that he became the rock upon which the church was built. In the book of Revelation, chapter 2, the writer describes being given a white stone, upon which a new name is written, and that name for each of us encompasses God’s vision of what we can become as we are drawn through the course of our lives by the magnet of God’s love for us. We come here to receive the transforming power of God’s love – don’t come if you don’t want to be changed!

So the question as we begin 2011 is: What are you going to leave behind, and what are you going to move towards in order to become that vision which God has for you – your new name.

Today we learn that that task, given each of us, is best expressed in community, in love and service to one another. Andrew and Simon, James and John, together left their nets and are formed into a new community. Today’s epistle from 1 Corinthians shows how Paul is teaching the early church to live that principle out. “I appeal to you my friends, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to agree among yourselves and avoid divisions, let there be complete unity of mind and thought.” (1 Cor 1 10)

Corinth was 40 miles south of Athens, an important strategic town, a commercial hub, religiously diverse, a Roman colony. Its reputation was that it was superficial culturally, known as sin city. It was a place where status and hierarchy were important and where the poor were abused by the rich. And out of that background people came to be built into a new community, the church, just as we do today. When we say “we are the body of Christ” it is always part aspiration – what we aspire to be, what we are becoming. And the basis of that becoming is the transforming power of God – so that we expect to be changed when we come here. As we are changed it is the story of Jesus and what he has done for us that is foundational for every one of us – so here there can be no status or hierarchy.

A particular challenge to that becoming process is being posed generally by the fact that we are a more complicated church than 10 years ago, and specifically by the Campaign. We are in any case a more diverse body than many churches, 70% of the congregation living outside the parish. But the campaign poses a specific challenge simply because it’s a huge task to raise all this money and many people are giving greatly of their time and energy – as well as money! – and strains and stresses are the result.

So what guidelines can we take from today’s first reading from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 to keep the good ship St Chad sailing a steady course?

1. Whatever group we belong to in church, Mothers union, choir, junior church, we find our unity in Christ – we belong to him.
2. The transforming power of God is love. 1 Corinthians culminates in that wonderful poem about love in chapter 13. We are to love one another. We come from a suspicious, litigious world, and of course we bring that mindset with us here. But we come to be changed – from suspicion to trust. We assume the best not the worst of each other, and that isn't naïve! And furthermore perfect love drives out fear.
3. It is through our relationships with one another that the power of Jesus in our lives is either made known – or not. Pay attention to those relationships here that you find difficult; trust that God can transform those. How we treat people here, especially newcomers, is important.
4. Communication is vital. And it's not easy in a growing and complicated body like St Chad's. This issue surfaces all the time, most recently with the Friends of St Chad's. We have to find ways of communicating better. That's one of the most important issues which I am looking to Patrick Playfair's mission audit to address. It is certainly likely that in the next 12 months the way we run the parish office must change to meet this challenge because the office is the hub of communications in the parish and to the business of forming community. And don't forget the part we all play in this business of communicating well – how we use emails, for example – would a telephone call or a face to face chat be better? And beware of communicating feelings in emails – they should be used to convey information. Richard Branson always prefers to pick the phone up.
5. Most of all, however great the challenge, however nasty and brutish the world we come from and go back to, the key notes here are HOPE and LOVE. Because it is the real and transforming power of God that is at the heart of all we do. Some great words from St Paul to finish:

“ Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or conceive, by the power which is at work among us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all ages. Amen”