

Three Congregations Service 2017

This morning we are *all together in one place!*... which is, of course, what makes this a Pentecost service! And can I begin by saying a sincere thank you to everyone for your willingness, once again, to accommodate the readjustments and rescheduling that make this occasion possible. I trust the benefits will become apparent.

And today I want to take the opportunity to think a little about our mission and witness and service as St George's in this locality and in the different contexts of our lives. Happily, our gospel reading gives us an ideal platform for mission thinking. It speaks of Jesus as going about the cities and villages *teaching, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and healing*. And because the harvest is plentiful and the labourers few, we see Jesus summon the twelve to roll their sleeves up, join him in the mission and get involved. He gives them authority to cast out demons and to heal. The mission, however, is to be specific. It is not a scattergun operation but is to be focussed among the lost sheep of the house of Israel. In this instance, the mission will not include Gentiles or Samaritans. The implication is that, in a missional mindset, it is important to know what your focus is; and to be as clear as possible about what you can't do as well as what you intend to do. Finally the missionaries are given instructions on how to equip and conduct themselves and about what their expectations should be – for example, of being sent out as sheep among wolves. Jesus also implies that there may be both external opposition and internal disagreement, even within families. The mission may be disturbing and may provoke controversy. On the other hand, the missionaries are given authority from the Lord and are reassured that where they do meet difficulties, the Holy Spirit will be close at hand to empower them with the right things to say and the wherewithal to make good judgements. The message from Jesus, as recorded by Matthew, appears to be: come and get involved; be specific – do what you can,

only where you can and how you can; and travel light knowing that you have authority and go forward in the power of the Spirit. Matthew gives us a very good template for considering the features, shape and character of mission – one we might want to adopt as we do our own thinking going forward.

Here at St George's in our own mission we have developed over many years a broad outreach into five local schools, the universities, local organisations and businesses (like Calthorpe, ROSPA and the Highfield), also working with local charities (like Edward's Trust, St Basils, the Birmingham Settlement and Remembering Srebrenica), working with residential communities (such as Sunrise and now Audley St George) and through local networks and clubs (Calthorpe residents, Rotary, sports clubs, political parties). We achieve this both corporately, and through the connections of individual church members. We also reach into all parts of the parish, including across the Hagley Road in work with Karis and the Ladywood Community Centre. This last week a new job club held a coffee morning in the centre to advertise their work. It complements the work of Suited for Success and sits alongside the Money Advice Drop-In. Although sitting comfortably here in church it may be hard to appreciate, our Ladywood ward tops the list nationally for the highest number of people on benefits (I discovered that this week). Therefore these local responses for enabling and encouraging people back into work are really important and we will want I hope to support them in every way we can. It was a great privilege for me to conduct the funeral of June Holland ten days ago, who we have been remembering in the prayers, who lived in Edgwood Court, Bellis Street. I came to appreciate that she was a sterling presence in both working with children earlier in her life and volunteering as a carer in the day centre in Edgwood Court over many years. Our parish has always benefitted from and continues to benefit from people willing to put heart and soul into the work of caring, healing and casting

out demons – of under employment, marginalisation and disenfranchisement – and so proclaiming the good news of the kingdom.

With all this in mind it has been very rewarding to see two new initiatives spring up at St George's recently. One is 'Baby Opera' that Zoe, Phil and their colleague Jaclyn White are pioneering. This offers a unique opportunity for little people to take some big steps into music making in a fun and challenging environment. And we wish the project very well as it establishes itself. The next event is on July 15th. At the other end of life, Eve Kirby and others working with her are starting 'DemCaf St George' which will be a drop-in cafe for people living with dementia and for their carers, with a warm welcome and suitable activities. Cafes will be on the first Tuesday of each month and the first cafe will be on November 7th from 10.30am to 12.30pm. I know that offers of volunteer help will be much appreciated.

At the level of the inspiration of faith, as I see it, these initiatives and the fostering of relationships with community partners in the development of all our mission initiatives as a church, all spring from a combination of the circumstances we find ourselves in and the challenges these present (which is the mission context) and the convictions we hold about what Christ calls us to do as his fellow missionaries, servants and witnesses. We of course undertake many initiatives for a very wide variety of reasons, which range from personal fulfilment, to the meeting of our own needs as well as the needs of others, to being driven by a vision for the kingdom of God or of following as faithful disciples of Christ. The beauty of the incarnation is that in all our undertakings, whether it be pastorally, in schools, with particular age groups or interest groups, Christ works within and through us, as rough-and-tumble human beings, with all our various motivations all jumbled up together, taking us as we are, yet nonetheless using our gifts and preferences to achieve something far more than we could hope for on our own. And as we stumble from one undertaking to

another and from one phase of life to another, we pray that Christ will somehow fashion us more and more closely into his way of suffering love and that the Holy Spirit will be faithful in bringing out in us the gifts she gives, to bear fruit that will last. And we should be emboldened and encouraged in this season of Pentecost by the strong rushing wind and fire, empowering us in all we do!

But I'd like to press this a little further. As we attempt to stay faithful in our mission calling, I think that one of the things we discover is that there is in fact an important unity between *what we do* and *what we believe*. This is a consequence of how our gifts and talents get used in the mission task – if we will make ourselves available. And if we do find that what we do and what we believe does come together in what we get involved in, then we may also find that the distinction between mission and evangelism begins to blur. If mission is the 'doing of good news' and evangelism is the 'proclaiming of good news', it becomes natural for what we do in mission to proclaim what we believe, and for what we believe as evangelists to be manifest in what we do. What goes on in this dynamic, is that, as we noted a couple of weeks ago, the hope that is in us is truly expressed – as the writer of 1 Peter urges, "always be ready to account for the hope that is in you". The doing of mission expresses the hope that is in us! What this reminds us, of course, is that we hold within us a very powerful and attractive and compelling vision of humanity, creation, our lives and the life of the world – which is a vision for building the kingdom of God following in the way of Christ! And if we stop and think about it, this is a very attractive vision and proposition and something to be shared! I would be for saying therefore, that as we do mission we are evangelists! As we do mission we share a vision of what we long for and what inspires us! We may share it principally through what we do or we may share it through what we say, but one way or another we will share it. As we noted at the Tuesday communion service this week, we cannot hide our light under a bushell basket! Rather, it must be put on a lampstand so that

the light will shine – and why on the lampstand, because it is not our light as such that shines so brightly, but the light of Christ shining through us. “You are the light of the world”, said Jesus in that same passage. We know he is the light of the world; but if we are that light too, it will shine out through us! He will shine out through us! For what we hold within us is not just a vision but his very presence. The wonder and the challenge is that however fallible, human, rough-and-tumble or inadequate we may think ourselves to be, nothing will stop the light shining through!

What this brings me to is a final thought, which is to note that if what is true individually is true collectively, then we may want to remind ourselves as well that *as the community of St George’s* we are a light on a lampstand which will necessarily, and despite ourselves, be drawing people to faith and action. What this means, and what this calls out of us, is that we need to be more and more ready to invite, welcome and receive those people whom God is calling and those people, adults and children, who the Spirit is leading, who are not yet members of our community but who soon will be! If the light is on the lampstand, they will come to the light! My strong belief is that like Abraham by the oaks at Mamre making dinner for the three visitors in anticipation of what they might bring, we need to be all the time spreading a table, both the beautiful table of our altar and the lovely tables we will enjoy shortly in the north aisle and in the Whitmore Room, preparing to receive those whom God is calling. As missionaries and evangelists we are to be filled, therefore, with expectation! If we keep praying, keep joyful and faithful in our worship and keep opening our doors and our hearts in new ways, we will continue to grow – in faith, in discipleship, in unity and fellowship, and in numbers.

I had anticipated saying more today about how our numbers have fallen a little from near 90 five years ago to nearer 70 to 80 on a Sunday. This has been largely owing, sadly, to a significant number of deaths, but also to

people from our congregations retiring out of Birmingham, and some of our younger people taking up jobs outside Birmingham. This is something we do need to address because it links to the diocesan programme called 'People and Places' which determines who gets what clergy resources in the future; and one of the criteria is the Sunday attendance. We looked at this at the annual meeting in April and the PCC will undertake on your behalf to keep pace with developments and report back. So the detail of this can wait. But we will return to it.

Much more importantly, I think, we have considered today instead the substance and the basis of how we will continue to grow and flourish, which I believe is through continued faithfulness to our mission calling and keeping the light on the lampstand! So, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven."

2067 Words
Reverend Julian Francis
June 18th 2017