

Mission, Theology and Back to Church Sunday

Devote yourselves to prayer, being watchful and thankful. Be wise in the way you act toward outsiders; make the most of every opportunity.

Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone. (Colossians chapter 4)

At the outset of my remarks, I want to thank Father Andrew, the two Church wardens and you, as PCC members for inviting me to speak and share something of my experience of Back to Church Sunday. It is my sincere hope that my words will make clear some of the important areas in relation to Back to Church Sunday as well as providing some things for us, as a parish to reflect upon as we begin the preparation and reflection for the event in September.

I trust that you've all had an opportunity to read my brief article in Bulletin 16 which outlines the background to how Back to Church Sunday began in the Diocese of Manchester by the Cathedral Canon Evangelist, Robin Gamble. Since 2004, when Back to Church Sunday began, this has grown significantly that many churches of various Christian traditions nationally have signed up to committing themselves to this initiative. This is in itself an important thing to be aware of. In reflecting on the practicalities, there is also an article by Captain Gordon Banks and The Rev'd David Guest in the recent Diocesan Chichester magazine. If you have not read it, I commend both articles to you for background and further reading after this address.

As some of you maybe aware, before coming to Bognor Regis last summer I was serving as the Lay Assistant Worship Leader at St Hilda's Church in York. My nature of role at St Hilda's focused particularly on the development of worship and liturgy; asking the fundamental question was how could we, in the parish use authorised liturgy but for it to be used in some way that it spoke to people? This led subsequently to ask how can this be transmitted to the local community through the parish website, the local press and other areas?

Back to Church Sunday should be conducted in the context of a normal service (dare I say normal in relation to the Family Eucharist!) With regards liturgy, one of the definitions of a good liturgical service is that children and adults can meet, share and worship God together without either party cringing and feeling as if it was not aimed at them. This question over worship remains one of the two major components of Back to Church Sunday.

Whilst preparing for this evening's address to you, I was reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two parishes, St Hilda's and here. The churches are very similar in terms of how mission is viewed. Underlying both churches in the opportunity for real mission if only open to the leading and directing of God. Back to Church Sunday should not be done in the business management approach to Church but done looking for God's guidance and as part of the bigger picture. That is not to be read as a criticism but to say that to truly engage in mission, it must be rooted in prayer and enabling God to speak.

What is our mindset of mission?

Mission and evangelism within the church always seems to get bad press and as the Bishop of Norwich said at Caritas 'it shouldn't but there is great things going on in the Church to meet real human need - the imagery which come to mind when we think of mission and evangelism is typically American evangelist types. I once had the chance to see an American programme on the God TV in which two 'able' and 'bright' men in where sat in tie discussing the temperature of hell. The dialogue went like this "So Bob, what is the temperature of hell?" The other gentlemen responded by saying "Well John, the Bible doesn't tell us – but it's pretty damn hot" The dialogue reassured with discussing who is going to Hell "Is it just Catholics going to hell or Americans too?". These particularly views of mission and evangelism often involve images of unnecessary judgement and manipulation and many of us here would affirm that mission and evangelism isn't for us.

At a public conference on Catholic mission recently, the Bishop of Reading, Stephen Cottrell made the striking point that as Anglicans, we have always seen mission in terms of what some other churches do and that we don't need to do. This is mirrored with the unwritten understanding that as Christian churches go, the Church of England is far superior to other forms and brands of Christianity and hence once real seekers after faith are enlightened, they will in some form 'graduate' into the correct way of doing things ie Anglicanism. However, I would want to say that the myth which Bishop Stephen outlines needs to be done away with if we want to engage and speak to the wider society.

You may well be sat there thinking 'Well Adam, where does this apply to Back to Church Sunday?' Well it does, because how we view *what* we are seeking to achieve or develop through Back to Church Sunday will ultimately effect how we do it. If we subscribe to the view that Church attendance is simply about picking up 'dis-affected' Christians from other churches, we seek to lose the heart of what might be possible.

I began my address this evening with a scripture reading from St Paul; for it is the scriptures which set out and resonant very clearly about how we should reflect on this important subject. Churches which place an empathises on such books of Mission-Shaped Church, the Purpose Driven Church, An Idiots Guide to growing your Church need to be drawn back to the Scripture. Mission and evangelism is not a new concept but rooted back in the New Testament; it is simply now that our practices and expressing may have changed. I was encouraged by the Bishop of Lewes, Wallace Benn at the Open Deanery Synod Meeting earlier this month that the Church of England is making mission and evangelism an important agenda item. Yet, on the other hand, there remains inside the Church a mis-understanding of Mission and Evangelism, for example when you vox-pop people about Mission and Evangelism, it quickly emerges that The Great Commission in Matthew's Gospel 'Go therefore and make...' comes to mind, and this is valid but it is important to note that Jesus' word are 'Go, therefore and make disciples of all nations.' It is not, 'Go therefore and make churchgoers' and he doesn't say 'Go therefore and make converts'. Discipleship is, as we have heard recently is about entering into a journey of Christian discovery and this is crucial to Back to Church Sunday, if it is to be deemed successful.

I notice that I spent sometime talking about mission before saying anything about Back to Church Sunday, yet it is still the important place to begin. Evangelism methods should never simply be seen as a 'means to an end' but should be entered informed and

commended prayerfully to the Lord. I now want to go on and say something about Back to Church Sunday from experience about the practicalities of the process.

So, the fundamental question : Why take part in Back to Church Sunday?

At St Hilda's Church, we got involved in Back to Church Sunday because on the staff team was the Diocesan Mission Officer and advisor to the Archbishop of York, Paul Wordsworth. Paul had spent many years assisting the Mission Action Plan programme for the former Archbishop of York, Dr David Hope. There is many similarities to that which we prepared for in relation to the Caritas event last weekend. As part of the Mission Action planning process, internal church research has shown that to expand and develop a church, the welcome and hospitality ministry must be clearly mission focused.

A story to illustrate what I mean; at St Hilda's, we had a lady called Ann, who had been sides-person for many, many years. She had many social problems but was nevertheless a very faithful Christian who served for many years with the Children's work. However, she used to have a problem on Sunday. Ann used to arrive at church after visiting the corner shop for her cigarette's every week at five to ten waiting for one of the Wardens or I to open up for the 10.30am Eucharist, she would come into church smelling of smoke and rather than a 'Good morning' or 'Welcome to St Hilda's; she used to say 'HERE' in a rather aggressive tone when handing out the pew-sheet, service book and hymn list. Yet despite this being the case for many years, no-one wanted to take over the job of Side-person.

As a consequence at the July monthly staff team meeting, it was agreed that St Hilda's would take part in the Back to Church Sunday initiative to invite the congregation to take 'lead' in looking at the welcome and hospitality. The challenges I offer here are – If you were visiting St Wilfrid's for the first time, what would be your first impressions? Has it changed in recent times? Do you know what people think of St Wilfrid's now as a place of welcome? I ask those questions not to be aggressive but as a form of challenge. If we are going to grow, we must be prepared to be honest and to work this through.

2. Closed or open? : That is the question.

The Bishop of Horsham, Lindsay Urwin at the May Open Deanery Synod Meeting reflected on my second of my points on welcome and ministry. Bishop Lindsey said that no church sees itself as a closed church and that many churches believe themselves to be welcoming but this is not always the case. In commending the process of Back to Church Sunday in this parish, as a PCC there must be an open exploration to see this not simply for the one off event at Back to Church Sunday but a question which informs our regular church practice from now on. It is easy for us to be a 'Church on show' for one Sunday. We can all come with fake smiles, clean shaven (men and women!) and all can be well but it is what happens after.

The challenge for us here is whether we are prepared to engage with an outgoing process of developing welcome and ministry so that if people return, they can still receive that warm welcome. I am informed that in the past, the Church used to have welcomer's. I appreciate that there is already too many people at the back of Church in the Foyer each week, but can this be streamlined to an acceptance number which create the pre-service atmosphere. In the Back to Church Sunday research, those re-attending Church after a

time gap indicate that they have already decide whether at all they will attend again even before the service starts so this is remains an imperative ministry.

The Back to Church Sunday service itself

It is important that when planning the service itself, that similarly with the welcome ministry, this is set in a context which is not alien to our regular worshippers; and given the context of the Family Eucharist, our Back to Church Sunday will be part of the Annual Family Harvest Eucharist. Given that my experience of Back to Church Sunday was also rooted in a Eucharistic context, I have already sent to Father Andrew some suggestions for liturgy. I can confidently assert with regards the liturgy and service content that Father Andrew will remain true to form (as usual!). I would want to say that given the audience participation aspect of the Family Eucharist services, on Back to Church Sunday, there is a need to have people 'on hand' ready to join in.

One of the important aspects of Back to Church Sunday is that worship should not be seen as entertainment. Some years ago, the former Archbishop of York Dr David Hope made headlines made in the popular press for asserting the same thing. People who visit St Wilfrid's must see something which is authentic and enables people to meet with God.

At the end of the Back to Church Sunday liturgy, as is suggested in the material, Father Andrew has agreed that the service ends by releasing the 25 balloons in the pack outside as a mark of Christian witness. Given the importance, which was reaffirmed at Caritas by Bishop Lindsey that people should see Christian witness this is an important part of the service so I'd encourage you to reflect on whether there is something here which you might be prepared to get involved in.

The After Service atmosphere

After the end of the service, there should be an opportunity for refreshments and social networking in the Church Hall. This means each of us who have invited someone to join us to stay with them and introduce them to our Christian friends.

I remember the Bishop of Selby, Martin Wallace once saying to an inset training day I attended in York that 'roast chicken/turkey/beef isn't what is on the menu after most Sunday service but rather Roast Vicar, moaning about the length of the sermon, how he could have done X,Y or Z better'. Let us use Back to Church Sunday as an opportunity to develop new patterns of engaging one with another as fellow brothers and sisters in Christ.

Rolla Cola, weak tea, soggy biscuits; that has been used as a description in one church featured in the Back to Church Sunday promotion material of what is given at the end of Sunday services in the Church Hall. The theme of Back to Church Sunday this year is making people feel VIP's so this needs to continue after the service too. Let us consider how the Wives Group might assist in the refreshments after the service.

Can we come back again?

The Bishop of Norwich at the Caritas event in Brighton made the point that Church is often seen as something which we need to be invited to. Church is no longer seen as place which people can simply turn up and meet with God. We may well have invited

someone to come to Back to Church Sunday but let us consider how we might encourage returning again.

It maybe worth considering as it suggests in the Back to Church Sunday material having both house groups meet in the following week after Back to Church Sunday for a social meeting – possibly wine and cheese. Possibly, thinking about whether there is an Alpha Course in the area which we can support and point people in the direction of. One of the things which we did in York was an ‘Agnostics Anonymous’ evening in which people are invited to come and grill the Vicar or members of the Church on their faith.

There is so much which can be done to encourage a social and spiritual side to those maybe seeking something. There might not be a huge take-up for these events but it certainly can cater for some people.

What can we do NOW?

Much of what I have reflected upon is about the future; but what can we do now. It is important not to leave any of this planning to Father Andrew, the other clergy, the office or others but start now getting on your knees to pray and reflect on what you might be able to do and then start to do it! As the letter by St James reminds us

In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. (James 2) v 17)

We MUST all make an effort to invite someone to join us for worship on Sunday 28th September, so have you decided on someone who you can bring to Back to Church Sunday? If yes, then I'd encourage you to start now to pray for them that they may indeed come so when the invitations come out in August, you have already got someone in mind. If you haven't got someone in mind, have a chance to think about WHO you might invite? It can be anybody, a family member, a friend, a colleague. What it shouldn't be – as mentioned earlier is ‘nicking’ someone from another Church.

But, most of all, let us have a praying heart that God would use this initiative to bless and grow the community here at St Wilfrid's in ways of true and honest disciples of Jesus Christ.

At Caritas last Saturday, the Archbishop of York ended his address by reminding us of Antoine de Saint-Exupery who said

“If you want to build a boat, Don't summon people to buy wood, Prepare tools, distribute jobs And organize the work; rather inspire in them a yearning for the wide boundless ocean.”

So, as a Church journeying forward into the unknown water through this initiative of Back to Church Sunday, let us do so in trust and humility so that God maybe glorified through us.

Thank you for listening.

Adam May
Address to the PCC
Thursday 26th June 2008