

*St.Aidan's West Epping, 16th February 2020*

**“MISSION: WHAT IS THE CHURCH FOR?”**

**(Deut 10:12-22; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Peter 2:4-12; John 20:24-31)**

“You are the light of the world. Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your father in heaven.” Words of Jesus that were part of our Gospel reading for last Sunday. Perhaps Bruce Hunter even preached on them, as I did at St.Alban's. They actually fitted in well with the series Ross has put together that encourages us to think about how we live **out** in the world, and how we bear witness to our faith **out** in the community.

Today's reading from the First Letter of Peter has been chosen by Ross to bring the series to a conclusion, although I suspect our sermons will never take us too far away from God's call to live consistent Christian lives, and to bear witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Our reading from 1 Peter picks up the image of God's church as a building: not just any building, but as the temple of God. The temple was seen as God's earthly home, the place where he revealed himself to his people, and the place where people could seek his presence. Of course God is never limited to any building or any location, but we find such locations helpful because of our limitations as mere human beings!

Both Paul and Peter describe the church as a new temple of God. In a particular way, the **church** is where God is to be found today. Yes, God can be found anywhere: everywhere is sacred in a real way – everywhere is God's territory. But in a particular sense, God is among his people, especially as they gather together in the name of Christ. So God is here at St.Aidan's, not so much because it is a church building, but because we as his people are here, seeking his presence.

In Peter's image of the church as a temple, there is one particular feature: the cornerstone. The cornerstone is the key to the whole building: it sets it in position, it determines the direction in which the walls will be built. And in Peter's image, Christ is the cornerstone. It is he who determines the position and the direction for this spiritual temple. It is Christ the living stone who enables us, who are living stones in his temple, to find our place and our purpose and our significance, and indeed to find them in relation to him.

Peter quotes passages from the Old Testament to show how they are fulfilled in Jesus, the rock which can trip people up if they refuse to listen to him, or Jesus the secure stone which provides a solid basis for life and indeed eternal life.

And then Peter quotes words of Moses from the Old Testament referring to the people of Israel, the people of God. But Peter finds a new depth to these words, applying them to God's new family in Christ.

We are a chosen people, says Peter, valued and precious to God. We are a royal priesthood, with direct access to God, all barriers down: we have no need for a go-between, for God in Christ is with us, and our sin has been dealt with by Jesus, who truly bridges the gap between God and us. We are a holy nation, the expression of the very kingdom of heaven. And we are a people belonging to God, with a relationship that is secure and intimate. We no longer lack any real significance, for we are truly God's people. And we have received God's mercy, his amazing grace.

How sad it is that so often we Christians take these things for granted!  
How sad it is that we so often act as if we were just like everyone else!

In fact, we are a people with a purpose. As Peter says, we were called into God's family in order that we may “proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light”. As a church, we proclaim those acts of God in our worship, singing and praising and praying as God's people. We declare his praises as we care for one another, as we share in mutual loving support showing the love of Jesus, and as we encourage one another in our faith and faithfulness.

But we also are to proclaim God's mighty acts **out** in the community and the world, as we bear witness to our faith and reach out with the love of Christ to those around us. Yes, we are people with a purpose.

In Peter's day, the church was small and it was misunderstood. People thought that Christians might be cannibals because they shared the body and blood of Christ. People thought they were guilty of incest because they referred to each other as brothers and sisters. Christians were accused of breaking up families, as people became committed followers of Christ, and would sometimes be cast out of their families. And they were seen as rebels against Rome because they said not that Caesar is Lord, but that Jesus is Lord.

So many people judge the church today based on the worst things which Christians and even Christian leaders have said or done. In this context, how can we truly bear witness to Christ? Peter calls on us to conduct ourselves honourably among the unbelievers, so that though they may malign us as evildoers, they may see our honourable deeds and glorify our Father in heaven. It's pretty similar to something I said last week at St. Alban's when I was reflecting on what it is to be the light of the world, reflecting the light of Jesus in our lives.

I said that if people see the good works we do, but do not know that we are committed followers of Christ, they have no reason to praise God. They might say: "She's a good person. He's a person to admire." That's nice, but it's not what Jesus was talking about. They are not seeing our good works as a reason to glorify our Father in heaven.

You see, true Christian witness involves both words **and** actions. Good deeds and helpful actions don't by themselves point people to the love of Christ. Similarly, witness that is just words, but words that are not backed up by a life that displays a desire to please God and to lovingly serve others, is not going to be taken seriously. Our words and our lives must go together if our witness is to be the real thing.

The purpose of the church is to bring glory to God. We are not on our own as followers of Jesus. We are stones in a spiritual temple. We belong together. But the church is made up of individuals who are **each** followers of Christ. When visitors join us, may they see a community that is welcoming and loving, and in which people truly care for each other. That is part of our witness as a church, just as our liturgy is a witness. But out in the community and the world, we don't have to be bailing people up and asking them if they've been saved by the blood of the Lamb: but we can be open about our faith and our connection to the church, so that people can see our good lives and realize that we are followers of Christ.

We **can** help to overcome misunderstanding and prejudice, and if we can't answer people's questions, we can tell them we'll find out the answer, or we can invite them along to church, or we can put them on to Ross or myself. Yes, we can bear witness to the Saviour and his message.

Jesus is the light of the world. Let us reflect his life in our lives and our words, bearing witness to his love and praying that people will come to give glory to our Father who is in heaven. Amen.

*Paul Weaver*