

A Christ-like church

May my words be faithful to the written word and may the written word lead us to the Living Word, Jesus the Lord. Amen.

The Christian faith can, I think, be said to be premised around three doctrines. The the doctrine of creation; the doctrine of the incarnation or the doctrine of God; and the doctrine of atonement or redemption.

775 years ago yesterday there was a great party with a deer roasted as the people of the small town of Witney had a Feast to celebrate their new Church. This 'new' church was built as a lasting testimony to the Christian belief that Creation is fundamentally good and sacred, not flawed and sinful; that Christ came to live among us and blessed creation by his very toes touching the dust of the earth and the grittiness we find in the gospels; and the belief that we - yes, you and me (and all of creation) — are made at-one through Christ and are redeemed to become a part of God in eternity.

Had not Mary said yes, then all of this might have been different. Today we celebrate the birth-day of our Patron, Mary, Jesus's mother: the 'God-bearer' or 'mother of God' as her ecumenical title is. For Mary's womb becomes the Temple out of which Yahweh will emerge clothed in flesh. And we celebrate our dedication festival today - remembering the celebrations on the 8th September in 1243 when this new church - on the site of a much older one - was rededicated.

This ancient house of prayer stands in witness to what we see in the the symphonic resonances of the bible - the swelling history unfolding in the pages of our sacred texts - as we move from the words of the Spirit hovering over the earth through the

law to the prophets and eventually the coming of Christ as a human being into the very presence of human flesh in Jesus at the Incarnation. God made flesh, 'full of grace and truth' - as God is birthed in humanity and the Spirit hovers again, this time over Mary.

Now many of you will know Mary has not been uncontroversial in the history of the church. However, in the *massive* majority of the history of the Church (including our own history in the Anglican church) - Mary has a pre-eminent place among the Saints as the person who gives to us a right understanding of the real humanity of Jesus. Without Mary, there is no incarnation, creation is lost, and there is no atonement or redemption.

Luke, our gospel writer, shows Mary as a role model for the ideal Christian: she is *the* model for Christian discipleship, the person of all persons whom we should emulate if we wish to follow her son. She shows us what it is for us to be Christ-like.

In the Gospel of Luke, Mary is the most Christ-like human being in the story. Mary's words to the angel in today's gospel are an exact parallel of what Jesus will later pray in the garden, 'Let it be with me according to your word' mirrors, 'Not my will but yours be done'.

Mary's call - vocation - is laid bare today. It mirrors patterns for Moses (Exodus 3.1-12), Isaiah (Isa 6.1-13) and Samuel (2 Samuel 3.4-9). And we see Mary's journey through confusion to faithfulness as she moves from 'How can this be' to 'here am I the servant of the Lord'. As Mary becomes the 'house' that will build God out of her cells and blood, and Mary, the peasant girl, births God into the world and then let's go.

Yet there is more than this. The annunciation is *our* story - the

story of *our* confusion and disbelief when God appears, and then feels to have gone and we are left to pick up the pieces. This movement of comfort, assurance, explaining a bit of the plan, questioning doubt and agreement to partnership is central to us all. We too here in S Mary's Witney have to learn to let the process flow. 'Yes, let it be...'

There's such wisdom in those words. Every time we say, 'No. The rules say...' we hurt others and ourselves. Instead we can dance with the God of love and say, 'Let it be'.

There are those who criticise the use of our church to welcome in those outside into this house of prayer through our festivals. They argue that we should keep the sacred space reserved and 'ordered'. To them I point to the passionate God of love who constantly chooses the unexpected, who breaks down barriers that exclude and prevent. The God who takes new paths, yet untrodden, to reach out to those who do not yet know the power of God's love: the tax collectors, prostitutes and sinners are before the righteous pharisees in the Kingdom.

Today we rejoice with our patron, Mary, who was committed to personal growth and the release of energy long suppressed - a hospitable person who shows unconditional love and self-determination - as Ruth, Tamar, Rahab and Bathsheba did before her.

And now it's us... as we prepare for the next 775 years.

In sharing the the song of testimony and the gospel of peace I believe that it is through hospitality and welcome that we can best share the Good News. As I read recently, '*The call of God keeps after us, calling us by name, until finally we step over the lines we have drawn for ourselves and discover a whole new world on the other side.*' (Rev. Barbara Brown Taylor)

For me as I reflect on 9 years of ministry here and my small attempts to break down barriers and invite others in from outside the community of faith here, I believe passionately that we are following the path and gritty determination of a young unmarried mother who said yes, and responded to a God who has the power to unravel every injustice yet placed this power in the hands of a tiny baby.

My hope for the future of this amazing church is that we will become - yes - more Christ-like. Today we begin our 775 celebrations and start a series of sermons about what it means for us to hope in the future. We've got various speakers outlined in the new leaflet and I hope they will challenge us to be more open, to be more confident and to be more Christ-like.

Like Christ - if we are brave enough - we can give our best gift of all - ourselves. Without any certainty that it is going to be understood or appreciated - yet still we go out to other people, we offer our relationship with God, our longing to help, to love and to heal. We will continue to be prepared to be vulnerable, to be seen as a fool by some, in a way that only a Christian will attempt. We do that because our faith is grounded in the Incarnation - in the foolishness of a God taking the form of a helpless baby, whose greatest moment was to hang forsaken on an instrument of torture and death. A God who believes in the fundamental goodness of creation. A God who has power to redeem our mistakes and once again make us one with God's very self.

(cf Monican Furlong's address to the clergy of Wakefield Diocese 1966)

The setting in which we find ourselves in 2018 is very different when we compare it to 1243. Back that in the 1200s it was an agricultural society, where most inhabitants would be peasants, who would suffer famine, plague and war. Interestingly though,

in the same month as our church was consecrated our country signed a truce with France (and who knows we might even have a truce with Brexit negotiations before too long!). It was also only 3 years after S Paul's Cathedral had been consecrated, and it was 2 years before Westminster Abbey was rebuilt in Gothic style and reconsecrated.

But now in 2018 our economic system is faster and knowledge increases at breakneck speed. And things move along so quickly.

And yet...

If we have the courage to live out our faith, to allow God to transform us and renew us. Then what a future this house of prayer has. Rather than retreating into a silo of safety, where we only mix with those who think like us, where we only invite in those we consider to be sound and of like opinion. Rather than this, let us be those who embrace those outside our comfort zone, let us show forth God's all encompassing love.

For this very building, the stones of which have been hallowed by countless prayers, is a place called to be a base from which the people of God go into the world and where all are welcomed in. Yes, our church building is meant to be a place of life, a centre of ministry, where God's people gather to worship, to hear the message of the angels, to celebrate the meaning of life, and to be transformed, and then "burst forth," back out into the world to share the Good News with, and transform the lives of, others. And at the same time it is also a place of assembly, where the 'other' is welcomed in, to allow that world to break in to this space, to shape and form it and to change us.

In 1243 this building was an outrageous statement of the presence of God in this place, long before Witney was a town

like today. It was a place of encounter and welcome - the oldest party venue in Witney, the oldest shop or market in Witney, the oldest place of gathering - as well as of worship. It was a statement of the permanence of God and a witness to the God who abides among God's people, made known to us in the cosmic sacrament of the world, revealing to us all the truth of Jesus Christ, the same today, yesterday and tomorrow.

To be a Christ-like church - one founded on the doctrine of creation, on the doctrine of the incarnation (the doctrine of God) and the doctrine of atonement or redemption - we are to follow Christ's command at the Eucharist and to be those who recognise the need to break down that which separates us from others and excludes others. And we are to take to heart the salutation of the angel, 'Greetings favoured one. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.'

May we in Grace and hope, say 'Yes, let it be...', join Mary's song, and follow her Son. Amen.

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