

Sunday 25 January 2009

What do we belong to church for?

Readings:

Old Testament: Jonah 3:1-5, 10

Gospel: Mark 1: 14-20

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- Last week's Gospel passage: People intrigued by Jesus, asking to spend time with him, and Jesus' calling of first disciples.
- Old Testament passage: the young boy Samuel with Eli who served at the Temple, hearing the voice of God, initially not recognising or knowing who was speaking, but once he knew, saying, "Speak Lord, your servant is listening."
- The readings spoke to us about – and I preached about – what we refer to as "the call of God", to specific individuals for definite purposes of God's to be fulfilled in certain ways, AND also generally to all people to hear and respond to God's invitation to relationship. In and through Jesus Christ, that call is made very explicit.
- I could almost repeat that sermon this week. Lectionary has similar readings, including the wholehearted positive **response** of the people of Ninevah city to Jonah's call from God.
- We also heard from the writings of St Paul, and his understanding of the urgency of responding to the Gospel, of not living as though life will simply carry on forever, but knowing that God will call us to account for our lives, and living accordingly.

What do we belong to church?

- Why are WE here today? As many reasons as there are people present, a variety of motivations for why we belong
- We are here because in some way, we have heard and responded to God's call on our lives, to live them in relationship with God
- A changed world:
 - As Barack Obama made plain his Inauguration Speech last week, our world has changed in many ways and we need to deal with the realities of that changed world
 - Our lives are busy, complex and demanding, in a world that is highly secularised

- Generally we do what is important to us. I have previously quoted the inspirational preacher Tony Campolo who says, “Our commitments define us”.
- Jesus said as much in saying, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”.
- We put effort into the things that matter, and we do what is really important to us. We look for that which adds value.
- I want to encourage us to see once again that corporate worship and participation in the life of the church does indeed add value to our lives, and can be much more than an “optional extra” in busy times.
- The English word “church” corresponds with the Greek word, “ekklesia” – the assembly of people who have heard the call of God and responded positively. It has a sense of people “called out” – an assembly of people called out from mundane lives oblivious to God, and who instead are aware of God and choose to share life with God.
- It can also be used in the sense of those who have been invited – those whom God in Jesus Christ has invited to join his Kingdom, and who have responded. In other words, those who have repented and turned towards God (as per words heard in today’s Gospel passage).
- The NT use of the word indicates that it God assembles the people, and the assembly has been bought with the blood of Jesus on the cross – i.e. at a personal cost to God. It is not a casual grouping.
- The word applies to all people gathered everywhere (as we say in the Creed, “the holy catholic church” / i.e. universal) and also to a single gathering or congregation meeting in a home or building. The most important personality is Christ, no other person or persons are more important.
- So we are the ones who have been “called and assembled” by God / have assembled ourselves in response to God, for holy purposes:
 - Nourishment of the soul and the mind
 - Feeding our spirit
 - Touching of the emotions
- Introduction to the Service of Morning Prayer from An Anglican Prayer Book (p. 42)

[This was left out in the preached sermon – for sake of time]

- Further reasons for participating with the community of faith in regular worship:
 - Faithfulness – encouragement to be faithful disciples of Christ, and to allow our lives to be changed by our interactions with God and one another
 - Challenge – i.e. the Gospel is not only about words of comfort, but also contains a challenge
 - Friendship – with God and one another (as per Parish Vision Statement)
 - Expression of community
 - Which in turn is an expression of God (Trinity)
 - Crossing personal boundaries – wider perspectives and expanded horizons
 - Exposure to activities in the faith community that may help nurture my faith, answer difficult questions, or simply “hold me” in times of doubt or crisis (example – widowed woman...)
 - Hearing of good things God is continually doing, and other people’s experiences of it
 - Listening to the experience of God’s people through the ages – and the interventions of God in human affairs (Scripture and teaching based upon it)
 - “Doing Theology” – something we ALL do – concepts which express our understanding of God, limited as they may be, and according to which we live our lives
 - Support, comfort, advice – for ourselves and to offer to others
 - Accountable to others in faith
 - Prayer (many varieties, including confession of sin)
 - Sense of peace in a troubled life / world – not to isolate us from, but to give us a holy space to interact with God and perhaps some of God’s people
 - To offer expressions of joy
 - Encounter with God – worship; Be encountered by God (mental, emotional, spiritual) – in ways different to personal or small-group gatherings
 - Especially in the Communion – a very personal and yet equally corporate meal of the body of God’s people, being nourished by God in this amazing way
- To conclude:

Conclusion:

We Christians are people of the Resurrection, which came at huge cost and personal sacrifice to God. We are encouraged freely to respond to God and what God has done for us in Jesus Christ, and to see ourselves as people who joyfully choose to celebrate the Resurrection.

Our worship may not always be a “Wow!” entertaining kind of experience, but I pray that our worship will be such that it causes us to want to join frequently with God’s people for these purposes outlined today. I pray that that will be part of our response to Jesus who has called us to assemble in his name, that we may continue to do the work of Jesus and be the holy people of God.