

SERMON PREACHED AT SJH TRINITY 5 WEEK 14 YEAR B 4 JULY 2021.

In church this morning we are celebrating the eucharist, also called the mass or the communion service, and there are other titles that are sometimes used. There are many people who cannot be present in the building, but are joining the celebration from their homes since the service is being streamed. The whole community is celebrating, not just the priest. All of us offer prayer and worship. Some of us have specific parts to play – in reading or music, for example, or leading in Junior Church. The rôle of the priest is to preside, and there are some parts of the service which only a priest should do according to the rules of the church.

Fundamentally, we are celebrating what God has done for us in Christ. At the heart of that is Jesus' death and resurrection, made present to us in offering and sharing bread and wine which have been blessed to become the body and blood of Christ. This is what he commanded his followers to do. The word 'sharing' is important. I hope we say private prayers, and do things by ourselves because we are Christians, but Christianity is not a private religion, 'just me and my God,' as people sometimes say. In another use of the word 'body', S. Paul teaches us that the community of Christians, in all their diversity, become the body of Christ on earth, and use their different gifts to support each other.

We can also think of celebration in a more general sense. People use 'celebrate' to mean 'having a good time.' I hope we enjoy coming to church, that it's a high point of our week. I'm sure we look forward to the time when we can again have singing and servers. Worship and fellowship should be things we look forward to. This can be true even if our individual circumstances are causing us unhappiness. If we don't find love and support in church – and offer it to others – there's something wrong: we're not being the body of Christ.

But all is not well with the Church of England – and other denominations. I've been describing the sort of church we're used to: people gathering on a Sunday morning. Most churches have a serious shortage of members in the 20 to 60 age group. We have some, which is good. But churchgoing and even nominal Christian faith have been declining in the life of our society for decades. There are many reasons for this, though I'm not going to list them.

In some churches within our Deanery of Tutbury no one has offered to be a church warden or treasurer. A number of churches have a service only once a month. A financial crisis has been hastened by the pandemic. Our Diocese of Lichfield is losing £250,000 a month – money that is

needed to provide ministry to the parishes. Many churches face large heating, maintenance and insurance costs. We can't do nothing and expect that the things we're used to will just carry on.

I've mentioned a few times that the diocese asked each deanery to form a Shaping for Mission Team. Ours has met six times, has compiled a Review of what's going on in our deanery, and has produced a Vision of what's working well and should be supported, what should be started, and what should be given up or done in a different way. It recognised that parish churches are not the only contexts in which Christian life is practised. There are chaplaincies, such as at the hospital. There are church schools. And there are what are called 'Fresh Expressions' – which might be an online church or a church plant on a new residential development. The Vision will be used to make a plan for the deanery.

Several themes stood out from the work of the Team. One was working together – across and beyond parish boundaries, but also working with other community organisations. Another theme was encouraging every Christian to see himself or herself as a missionary disciple, practising faith every day of the week. This has some connection with this morning's gospel reading, in which Jesus sends his disciples out. We might envy them: they didn't have church structures to support! They were to travel light. They were going to people, not expecting people to come to them.

The motivation for mission must be love, not the necessity to survive. Love may be rejected, and to a large extent that was the experience of the prophet Ezekiel, as we heard in today's first reading. His situation was more acute than ours. God charged him to prophesy to the nation of Israel which had rebelled against God. Babylonian armies destroyed the temple in Jerusalem and took most Israelites, including Ezekiel, to exile in Babylon. Yet before and after that crisis he continued to speak the truth he had received: messages of judgement and hope. The people were restored to their land eventually. The temple was rebuilt. It was not the same as it had been. In fact it was better. A later prophet, Haggai, declared that

The latter splendour of this house shall be greater than the former, says the LORD of hosts; and in this place I will give prosperity.

Prosperity: the word used is *shalom*, well being or peace.

The church at present also has the opportunity to rebuild, not just try to prop up what is crumbling. It will take faith and hope, and a willingness to embrace present possibilities rather than restore the past. It will enable us to continue to be people who celebrate what God has done, and is doing in every age.