

Dedication Festival of St Lawrence, Abbots Langley
Luke 12. 22-31
20th February 2011

Today's service is about past, present and future.

- We look back to the past 40 years of this church and celebrate all that has been good since it was rebuilt after the terrible fire.
- In the present we've come today to give thanks to God for all his blessings over those past centuries.
- But it's not just the past or the present. If this celebration is to be true to the God who has created us and called us then we must also look to the future, praying that we will see much spiritual harvest over the coming years.

Of course, you the Christians of Abbots Langley are not the only people celebrating today. The 20th February is the 464th anniversary of the coronation of 9 year old Edward VI; it's the 70th birthday of the footballer Jimmy Greaves; and for the musicians among you today is 50th anniversary of the death of the composer Percy Grainger

Why do we keep anniversaries and birthdays? Because they are milestones on the journey, enabling us to pause and look back to see where we have come from and just how far we have travelled. The very existence of this building speaks eloquently of past generations of Christian men and women in this community who gave sacrificially in order to build this place of worship. It speaks of thousands of people who have voluntarily and gladly come here to worship each week; and it is a place at the centre of the community which has marked thousands of baptisms, and weddings and funerals. This anniversary reminds us of the importance that previous generation placed on their faith and of the importance of faith at the very heart of their community. It is a place where countless tears, both of joy and sadness have been shed. In the words of the famous poem by Philip Larkin:

A serious house on serious earth it is,
In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
And that much never can be obsolete,
Since someone will forever be surprising
A hunger in himself to be more serious,
And gravitating with it to this ground,
Which, once he hear, was proper to grow wise in,
If only that so many dead lie round.

But is this church building nothing more than a museum? No, it is more like a filling station; a place where we come each week to receive food and nourishment for the Christian journey. After this service I will be staying on to talk with some of you about our new diocesan initiative *Living God's Love*. It is made up of three themes which point to why God has called us:

1. Our first and primary task is God and specifically about Going deeper into God. Our human destiny is to spend eternity exploring and delighting in the truth, the majesty, the glory and the beauty of God...so we need to get ready for it now. Sadly, so often we in the church have portrayed God as dull and life denying. In the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge there is a pointing by the 17th century painter Salvator Rosa (1615-73). It's a gloomy painting and underneath are written the words 'Conception

is sinful, birth a punishment, life hard labour, death inevitable'. That's sounds really good news! But from the dawn of humanity there have been people from every tribe and every nation who have sought God; they have worshipped and prayed. Why? Because as human beings we need to make sense of our earthly existence and we need to wonder and we need to worship. And despite what some think, that in sophisticated Western Europe we have no need of God, all the evidence points in the opposite direction: the longings deep within the human heart still reach out towards God.

The reading which is set for today and which we have just heard read makes this point forcibly. It is from the Sermon on the Mount and we find Jesus speaking to his followers: 'Seek first the Kingdom of God and everything else will be given to you'. It's an extraordinary challenge. Jesus is saying if we put God first then everything else in our lives will fall into place.

This is about giving priority yourself to 'going deeper into God'. We cannot lead people where we have ourselves have not been, so those of us who are Christian leaders need to attend to our prayer and worship each day. That is the fountain from which all ministry and mission flows. But it is also about making it a priority for your corporate life here in this team ministry. There is nothing more important than the public worship of the church. For those of us in leadership whether clergy or laity we need to attend to at least three things:

- The welcome. Most churches are good at greeting people and terrible at welcome. We smile and say hello when people arrive but it is quite another thing to open the door to really welcome people into the inner life of the community of God's people. That's about really listening to and befriending people and treating each stranger as if they are Christ.
- The careful preparation of the readings from the bible, the leading of the prayers and way that we conduct the worship. People know when it's all last minute and has been thrown together in an ad hoc way.

... this is because of the vital importance of going deeper into God.

2. But as you look together to the future you are also following a God who calls us to move out from our worship into the world. That's why having worshipped week by week we pray: 'Send us out in the power of your Spirit to live and work to your praise and glory'. Unless our worship spills out into our daily lives and makes a difference then it is not really worship of the living God.

There is an obvious aspect to this at the present as we are facing huge cuts in public spending. There is a great opportunity to engage in the public debate about the future of our society, about the distinctive emphasis on caring for the poor and the marginalised, as well as the future of the planet and the environment. But we can also make a significant difference in smaller more local ways.

I recently read about a Mothers' Union meeting in a village in Kent. At this particular meeting were three guest speakers, all of whom were Mothers' Union workers in Zimbabwe. In their presentation they spoke of how important hand sewing-machines were to the villages in Zimbabwe where there was no electricity. The word went round the village, and soon there were eight old sewing machines retrieved from people's lofts and cellars and garages. However, the Zimbabwean women advised them that the only way these could reliably reach the villages would be if they were delivered personally – otherwise they would get stuck in customs until sometimes was willing to pay the bribes.

The British women, all aged over 60 I might add, were faced with a challenge – would they organize a few jumble sales to pay the shipping costs only to have the machines moulder in a customs yard in Harare? or would they go themselves to Zimbabwe, and personally take the sewing machines to the villages? Would they choose venturesome love or dare to journey out? But these women understood what this evening's reading was saying 'Do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. ²³For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. ²⁴Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! ²⁵And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁶If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest?'

In the end the women chose the path of venturesome love, and in so doing they unleashed a cascade of grace which affected so many people for good. The local newspaper followed the women's story at every stage. The message in the press about the church is invariably negative and often cynical. Now they were front-page: here were Christians trying to make a difference in the world. Watch out! The grannies are about!

But if the press approved, not all the women's families did. Should mother go? Wasn't it dangerous? And anyway, what about her bad back? The grandchildren, on the other hand, turned out to be more supportive of their grandmothers than were their parents: suddenly grannie was 'cool'. And there were knock-on effects in the village. People started to turn up at church to pray for the women's safety. People actually became quite passionate about praying for justice in Zimbabwe, and there was a growing understanding of world development issues. As for the eight women themselves, they were transformed by the experience: they were both radicalized, and softened by their journey to Africa. In turn, their own families have changed and had their eyes opened. It has also had the long-term result of their village choosing to twin not with a comfortable village in the Tuscany, but with one in Zimbabwe!

This is a wonderful example of a group of women being the living church of Jesus Christ today – making a real difference in the world, transforming communities. They didn't just preach the good news – they were the good news.

3. But thirdly, and finally, as well as going deeper into God and transforming communities, there is a vital task of making new disciples.

We are living in a time of rapid change and transition. In the past most people came to the church to have their babies baptised, to get confirmed, married and buried. They sought us out. But now times are different. We have to find ways to get out again into the public arena and to invite people to discover the amazing good news of Jesus Christ. That are at least three aspects to this:

- how can this building explain the good news? Many of our churches give the impression that they are castles designed to keep people out. How can we fling wide the doors? How can we develop these church buildings so that again they are at the heart of the local community every day of the week?;
- it means that those of us who are leaders and preachers have to think about apologetics – that's about giving reasons for the faith that we have. It's not good enough to say faith in God will make you feel good. There is an issue of the truth of the good news here and we need to present it in the public forum;
- it means creating opportunities for people to come and think through the faith, using tools such as Alpha or Emmaus course. It's not longer good enough to sit tight and

hope people will come to us. We have to plan, carefully and prayerfully about how and where we can make the places for honest seekers. One theologian wrote 'can we discover an honourable evangelism that is filled with a longing for souls to meet Christ and to know God, and yet respects them in their integrity, respects their minds, their experience and wishes to affirm and not denounce their humanity?... Can we struggle to discover an appropriate and honest evangelism that will help us to be faithful to the grand commission without setting the children's teeth on edge?'

These are three of the great challenges and opportunities ahead which are at the heart of *Living God's Love*. On this Dedication Festival and on the 40th Anniversary of the reopening of the church, may we be given grace to go deeper into God, to transform communities and to make new disciples.