

Sermon 04/11/18 – The Church

Exodus 19:1-6

1 Corinthians 12:12-31

John 15:1-5

We have reached the point in our series of sermons where we are considering church.

Now I had a great idea for this morning's sermon. I thought that we could put our coats on and go across to the library car park. Once there we would discuss which side of the road the church was on and having agreed that we, the church, were now on the Church House side we could come back into the warm again and sit down. That would successfully fill my 10 minute slot and ensure that we had indeed considered church.

But there was a danger that some of you might not come backand anyway we all know that it's not quite that simple.

So what have we learned from this morning's readings? In Exodus we have God's promise that the Israelites will be special to him if they listen and obey. Not dissimilar to the Gospel reading where we are urged to think about a vine. The vine grower prunes his vines in such a way that the branches which are fruiting are encouraged to bear more grapes, but the fruitless branches are removed. So we can conclude that in order to be God's people we must listen to him and be fruitful in God's eyes.

Paul goes to great lengths to tell the Corinthians, and us, the importance of understanding that it is together that we form the body of the church. Each of us is a different part, each is equally important whatever we contribute and however hidden that contribution may be.

What does this mean for us and what do we understand by church? Paul has been helpful in this. We only need to look at his list of the skills that God has designated. Teachers and apostles we might expect, but his adding to the list doers of mighty deeds and people with the gift of assistance tells us that this is far more than just a group of worshippers. It is a whole community each having and using their own gifts. So is being church about forming a community?

This reminded me of my neighbour Doris. We lived in a block of about 20 flats, all but one were occupied by young people excited at making their way in the world, and busy with the business of squeezing as much out of each day as possible. Doris lived in the remaining flat having moved there when her husband died and she could no longer afford the luxury flat that they had once occupied. She had swapped views of the park for a view of the railway that runs between Brighton and Hove. She could have spent her time bemoaning her lot but instead built the rest of us into a community. Who took in all the parcels and deliveries, kept spare keys for when we locked ourselves out – a scarily frequent event? In fact when the meter man called he went straight to her flat and she conducted him around the whole block. Who provided the first cup of tea when we moved in? We were the children that she had

never had, we all enjoyed the chats we had when collecting things, and we all knew where there was a shoulder to cry on when we had boyfriend trouble or failed exams. Doris certainly built a community but you would not have called it a church.

I have been trying to find a nice neat definition of church. In Matthew Christ tells his disciples that he will be with them where two or three are gathered together in his name. But is that sufficient to be regarded as church?

Increasingly we are asked to think of our Christian lives not as distinct from our everyday lives but as parts of the whole. To consider what we take out and what we bring in. In my childhood the Sundays on which our church had communion were noted by Duncan arriving with a loaf tucked under his arm, wrapped as was usual then in tissue paper. He was a baker by profession and it was his custom to bring the loaf which was last out of the oven on Saturday for the communion table the following day. Not many of us will bring something so tangible but skills and especially experiences from elsewhere also belong in our church life.

Similarly we send out things which are tangible – David and Elizabeth take the teabags and toilet rolls donated for food bank clients – but there are many less obvious ways in which we all take our faith into the wider world. A word of kindness to someone who is obviously having a bad day, responding positively to the person who wants to chat at the bus stop. And the obvious ways, the work we do with schools through initiatives like Open the Book and Easter and Christmas journeys. I'm not forgetting those of you who brought boxes to use for the LogIn lighthouse.

When I was doing my Reader training one task was to talk to someone who goes to a different church including asking them what they knew about our church. I spent a lively hour with my neighbour and her friend in which we acknowledged that our understanding of each other's churches was based more on assumption than on fact. What picture of church do we present to the outside world, and is it the one we would like?

A few years ago someone asked me about a forthcoming social event, 'You don't advertise very well', she said. I opened my mouth to defend that we had an advert in the magazine and in several weeks' pew slips but closed it quickly when I realised that neither of those advertised to people outside the church. We are our best adverts, we can commend things to others, we can make them known, how else will people outside be aware of the breadth of what goes on in our parish, and be aware of God's love. Without that interaction there is a danger of us looking like some sort of club, without an obvious route to membership?

Part of our commission is to touch people's lives. We will see this at the war memorial on Remembrance Sunday, at the crib service on Christmas Eve, on a Friday at Jimmy Tots. Not everyone can or should be part of everything, but we can support each other through showing interest, through reading the pew slip and the magazine so that we are aware of what is going on. We are privileged to be part of a parish rich in activity across the three churches, but it is easy to forget that all three are 'our church'. And of course through prayer we can seek God's guidance and support each other and our activities.

My search for a definition of church was not entirely fruitless. I found a definition that worked for me in a piece by a Brazilian theologian called Leonardo Boff. He describes the church as 'a community of faith, hope and charity'. But then I realised that we actually have as good a definition closer to home, in one of the alternative prayer after communion – the one that begins, 'Father of all'. Towards the end the prayer asks that we whom the Spirit lights give light to the world. We the church are the people who are lit by the Spirit, and we are commissioned to share that light with the world, through prayer, worship and in our relations with the wider community.