Newport – MAP Launch 14.4.13

Congregations are remarkable and fascinating things. When I think about them – and particularly when I think about St Mary’s – there is a then story and a now story. So let’s think first about the then story.

The then story has two sides to it. The first side is a good one. It’s about faithfulness. This church is here because of the faithfulness of people through the years. Most of them we have never met and they didn’t know who would come after them. They and the clergy who served them were here offering worship, mission and service year after year. That this church is here at all is a tribute to their faithfulness. Most slow stories have less good chapters and this one is no exception. Sometimes faithfulness turns in – it becomes a sort of dogged congregationalism which loses its vision and has no picture of the future beyond simply keeping going. Sometimes there are difficult moments – and you have had difficult times in the life of this congregation.

As we launch the Mission Action Plan today, we are here to celebrate the now story. The church of today – the people of the church of today – have gathered together in prayer and thoughtful conversation. The people of the church of today, working with Denise their Rector and with Val and Elaine the facilitators – who came from other places because we are members one of another – have gathered their thinking around two of the Nine Marks of Mission. Those two are No 8 – Serve the community in practical ways:reaching out to others, especially those in need – and No 9 – Ready to seek growth and cast the net

The Mission Action Plan sets out in practical terms what it means to develop the thinking of the congregation around those two Marks of Mission. It says who will do what. It’s a nailing of colours to the mast because it moves beyond being an aspirational document to being a practical document.

I think it is extraordinarily important. You may be surprised to hear that I very seldom use the word ‘change’. The better word – and it is a scriptural word – is transformation. Transformation describes an internal change which happens – which means that we see God, ourselves and the world in a different way. New things become possible. Even the most limited resources may be enough and more than enough. The little bit of the transformation for which I was present took place in the very early stages of the process which led to the launch of the Mission Action Plan today. It’s the question about the future. As bishop, I have responsibility for the present and future life of the congregation and for its ministry. But the real answers to the future of the congregation will be shaped by the congregation itself under God. It’s my task to help that to come about and to help to find an answer to the question of what ministerial support there will be here when Denise retires next year.

The readings today are all about the same things.

Paul has been difficult - breathing threats and murder against the Christians. God’s answer is a straightforward one – he strikes Paul blind as his way of turning him around – of transforming his life so that he might become the greatest of all evangelists.

If you look at the gospels, you find Jesus asking basic questions of his disciples – basic questions about faith and trust – basic questions which carry them away from the ‘keeping going’ mindset and bring them into the ‘living by faith’ mindset – away from the membership mindset and into the discipleship mindset.

At his enthronement service, the new Archbishop of Canterbury chose for his sermon the story of Jesus encouraging Peter to walk on the water. Jesus says simply to Peter, ‘Get out of the boat’ Step outside your place of safety and trust ….

Today we heard the Casting the Net story from St John’s Gospel – the disciples face a simple challenge of obedience. They have spent a long night fishing. Now Jesus says simply, ‘Put the net in on the other side’ The sharp question is simply whether or not they are going to do it their way or be responsive to the call of Christ.

It’s as simple as that. The church needs the long story of faithfulness. But it also needs to face that simple question about obedience to the way of Christ – about trusting faith as the dynamic that through which the church is shaped and grows.