SERMON AND DISCUSSION 1

GOD AT THE CENTRE – ITS ABOUT OUR SPIRITUALITY

Today I am offering you the first of two sermons which are intended to stir us to think spiritually about the future of our congregation. I called it ‘God at the Centre – it’s about our spirituality.’

In my time with you, I’ve tried to help the congregation to function more effectively – I’ve chaired the Vestry, I’ve worked with the staff, Alison and I have come and worshipped with you, I’ve listened to the pain, hurt and anger which many of you feel about what happened here. But my ultimate task is to help the congregation to find a fresh sense of direction and fresh hope. You have to move in that direction if there is to be a new future with a new Rector.

I’m hoping that some of you will sit down with me during coffee – on the stage in the hall – so that we can begin to talk about these things.

This Sunday next before Advent is called Christ the King Sunday – it’s a Sunday which is intended to call us back to faith as we approach the beginning of a new year in the church. Traditionally it has also been known as Stir Up Sunday and we shall use the traditional Stir Up Sunday Collect as our Post-Communion Prayer today. It links the stirring of faith with the stirring of the Christmas pudding as we begin to prepare for Christmas.

You might expect me to say – of the pain, hurt and anger – ‘just lay it down and move on’. You might expect me to say of ‘God at the centre’ - that what we need is be more believing, more faithful, more Godly, more pious, more prayerful. We have to do those things - but it’s not as simple as that.

I carry the memory from long back of Archbishop Desmond Tutu in Belfast. He said simply ‘This is all about spirituality’. He was addressing an audience of people who were in all sorts of ways aligned within the conflict and with peacemaking. He was saying, ‘You can have all the war that you want – all the peacemaking that you want – all the political settlements that you want. But in the end the healing of a community always comes down to its spirituality. I understood him to mean that faith must move from being belief or consent and become a powerful inner strength which daily shapes our lives. But it is powerful because is expressed in truth spoken in humility. Powerful too because it is lives forgiveness, healing and sacrifice.

After all, Jesus didn’t say that we had to be very intellectual, correct and orthodox. He said that if we want to enter the Kingdom we have to become like children. And he said, ‘By this shall all men know that you are my disciples – if you have love one for another.’

I think that some of you are coming to realise that I have a deep commitment to trying to help this congregation through its present difficulties. I’m here because of calling. Congregations which are in distress feel lost. They turn inwards and become places of strident voices, factionalism and loss of hope. They do as the people of Israel did when they asked Moses why he had brought them out into the wilderness to die – they constantly challenge leadership and authority. But this congregation and every congregation also has a group of saints. I mean faithful people who are feeling the pain of all of this and who yearn prayerfully to see healing and better times.

The problem is that the narrative of pain and loss, of blaming and group interest appears very strong. And people curl up inside when they contemplate the task of challenging it.

I have tried myself this morning not to join the culture of blaming. What I say to you I share out of my experience in leadership in the Scottish Episcopal Church, in the conflicts of the Anglican Communion and in all the difficulties of Northern Ireland. In the end, the way forward lies with the quieter voices which speak a constant truth and speak it in humility which is rooted in prayer.

The challenges of this Christ the King Sunday are about whether we follow the servant king? Does our spirituality shape our lives as his followers? Do we reach out to the least and the lost? Do we seek to serve rather than be served? Do we testify to the truth of God? It is the truth that Jesus came to the world to bring love and forgiveness. Are we capable of not just tolerance but forgiveness – of not just generosity but sacrifice