

What Next?

The Five Marks of Mission

An Introductory Sermon..

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O God, now and always. Amen

I am indebted to Bishop Katharine, Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church of America for these opening comments which she offered to her church by way of introduction to their journey into the 5 marks of mission.

Talitha Cum. Get up girl, you're not dead yet! Jesus might just as well be speaking to this church.

This event comes after an aging woman is healed of her haemorrhage when she finds the courage to reach out and touch Jesus' robe. Can we hear these remarkable healing stories as speaking to the body of Christ here in Tilehurst? The story is told twice, to drive home the point, if we don't understand the child's healing, perhaps we will recognise the woman made whole. We have lived too long like that shamed and bleeding woman, she had to endure finger wagers blaming her for her own illness. Anger and anxiety over apparent membership loss in this church has frequently prompted finger wagers to use that image of unstoppable haemorrhage and such finger wagging has been going on for many years.

As I mentioned in my address last week, there is no doubt that as the restoration of our church nears completion this magnificent building stands as one of the oldest in Tilehurst and serves as a beacon drawing people to share in our fellowship. The wonderful efforts of all involved in the last 8 years cannot be over emphasised and we have a superb base on which we can build the kingdom of God in this place.

Today we are beginning our series of sermons which we hope will help us to focus on what next in our Parish Life. I do hope you will try and come to as many of these services as possible, for the extension of the Kingdom can only be achieved by us carrying out God's work, underpinned by the guidance of his Holy Spirit.

In the coming weeks you are asked to seriously think about the part you can play in the future of our church – not just the building, important as it is, but also and crucially in the encouraging of family, friends and neighbours to join with us and help to shape our lives in responding to God's call.

Returning to the theme of our gospel, I firmly believe that until we begin to find the temerity to reach out and touch Jesus', robe this magnificent building will only be a beacon without fire.

We don't know why the woman in the Gospel story was bleeding, though through responsible reporting, we are learning how women are mistreated and abused all across the world. Part of our healing as a church may be in our willingness to tell the truth about that. Teaching about human trafficking and rape as a weapon of war, has begun to restore bleeding women to wholeness.

Tending the rainbow bruises and wounds from all sorts of violence in society may bring new life into this body. Like too many girls today, the daughter of Jairus is not referred to by her own name, she is known only in relation to her father, whose name means, God Enlightens. He pleads her cause, asking Jesus to lay hands on her so that she might be healed and live. Many have prayed and continue to pray that this church may be a sacramental expression of that plea.

Our Gospel story today begins with Jesus crossing the sea to the other side. Jesus has just left Gentile country, where he has delivered a man from near death, a man who has been living in the graveyard, a man possessed by a legion of demons. Jesus comes back to the Jewish side of the lake and heals this girl and woman.

The good shepherd is at work healing everywhere and everyone and that story cannot be contained, even when Christ tries to stop people from sharing this wonderfully good news. The healing and enlivening of this body will come in the same way, by crossing over into new territory.

The grass roots peacemakers in the West Bank are finding the courage to reach out and touch the robed image of God in their neighbours. The same thing is happening in war zones, where churches are teaching healthy and life giving images of manhood. Like the unnamed daughter and the shunned and bleeding woman, this church will find new life, by crossing old boundaries and exploring new territories.

Crossing culture and language boundaries to meet the face of God brings new life to resettled migrants and to those who welcome strangers for we too are asked to help in the work of our local Refugee Council.

Next week as part of our Harvest Celebrations we'll be asked to think about sustaining and renewing the life of the earth, then we'll be challenged about how we might proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom and this will be followed by inviting us to respond to all kinds of human need by loving service.

Then we'll be asked to consider how we follow the increasing sense of being a welcoming church and how we might work together to strengthen the work that is going on to teach, baptise and nurture all believers. Here, we'll look at the effect of our Emmaus courses and wonder how we might encourage the hundreds who come to celebrate Baptism with their families to recognise that here there is something wonderful to be experienced in becoming part of the Kingdom Growth in this place. Our final service in this series coincides with Remembrance Sunday on the 8th November – surely no better time to seek to transform unjust structures of society and to challenge violence of every kind in the pursuit of peace and reconciliation.

So then we have a period of reflection to be followed by us getting together on the 28th November to share our thoughts as to What Next in our parish life. We'll think about these 5 addresses and maybe we'll be overwhelmed by the Guidance of the Holy Spirit to concentrate on just one or two main themes. You may decide that it would be more effective to do a few things well but it is crucial that as members of this body you will need to give a commitment as to what part you are going to play in this exciting future

Despite seeing the apparent decline of weekly worshipping numbers as members choose to come less frequently, we still maintain our registered Church Membership at around 200. Our own fellowship will grow if we dare to cross new territories in our backyards, prisons, parks and pockets of despair, here in our own communities and across the globe.

If we believe, if we are faithful, we know that ancient truth remains, resurrection always emerges from death. That healing may cost plenty of blood, sweat and tears, but it's rooted in the firm belief that God does enlighten, heal and deliver. Pay no attention to the finger wagging.

As Bishop Katherine concludes her address – may I also invite you to turn around and look for the hem of Jesus' robe, go searching in new territory, reach out and touch what is clothing the image of God. Give your heart to that search and you will not only find healing, you will become healing.

Share what you find and you will discover that abundant life for which all God's children have been created and indeed the Lord will turn weeping into dancing.

Talitha Cum. Get up girl and boy and woman and man, get up and dance!

In the name of the ever living and enlivening God, Father Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

This sermon was given by The Rector at the start of the Five Marks of Mission services.