

What Next?

The Five Marks of Mission

2nd Mark - Teach - given on the 1st November by John Rogers

John 15.9-17 & Matt 28.19-20

For all the saints who from their labours rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed. Yes – today is All Saints Day and as we consider our next Mark of Mission in our What Next series it is no coincidence that the example of Saints provides a springboard. But not, I hasten to add - Saints who rest from their labours!

Throughout these sermons we ask all the members of our congregations what does this mean for you?

So to start I want to focus on the 1st gospel text. Jesus gives us a new Commandment that “you love one another as I have loved you” Here we have an apparently neat formula: the Father loves the Son, the Son loves the disciples, and the disciples are to love one another. The task of the disciples is actually framed as a “commandment,” a word that can be confusing to those who are steeped in a gospel of grace. How can Jesus be laying down a law?

I resonate with those who blanch at the word commandment: “loving one another” can easily become an old-fashioned law. We all have enough to do, our own projects and tasks. When the preacher stands and thunders, “love one another,” it often sounds like another project on the to-do list, and not an easy one at that! We have to be honest that the “other” we are asked to love, like ourselves, is some mix of loveable and hard-to-love. The seemingly simple act of loving one another is often very demanding. It asks for sacrifice, forbearance, forgiveness, empathy, compassion, thoughtfulness, wisdom; it asks for time and attention, the most precious, and fleeting, and scarce thing we have.

Here at St. Michael’s the development of our welcome team and the increasing practice of everyone in our church community taking seriously their own part in making people feel welcome is, I believe the first demonstration of our love for each other.

I have asked a number of people to say what they value about St. Michael’s ...

Russell recalls that “the warmth of the welcome and the more traditional form of service persuaded me to learn more about St Michaels. I have found that the initial

warm welcome is not skin deep and I have managed to integrate and find ways to help, as suits my “talents” such as they are.

Nikki recalls that she and Steven were searching for somewhere that suited both our styles of worship; mine Catholic and slightly meditative, and his Anglo-catholic or high church with a musical tradition. We felt welcomed in St Michael’s from the first Sunday we visited, without too much pushiness or evangelical affection but just the right balance of respectful but friendly. We are grateful to the rector for agreeing to marry us here and had a wonderful wedding, making use of this beautiful ancient church and its church hall. We have never felt pressured into anything but have always experienced warmth and friendliness from the congregation.

Fiona says, “From my first visit to St Michael’s (in the Hall when the Church was being renovated) I felt the warmth and welcome from the congregation; the people around me included me in their conversation so that I was not ignored and at the end of the service the Rector made a point of speaking and, I felt, he (together with the congregation) was interested.

Since joining the church, I now feel very much a part of the St Michael’s family, something that has been lacking in other churches I have attended in the past. The warmth and welcome is constant, whatever the service or activity being offered. I have been encouraged to fully integrate in all areas and have received encouragement and help to achieve the specific task I offered to undertake (the garden).

Brenda Mason said she found St. Michael’s very welcoming - people here gather others in and this helps everyone feel they belong.

Wyn Hunt feels that St. Michael’s is a very important part of her life and values the support she has received over many years.

Jenny Searle goes on to say that what she likes about St. Michael's is the more traditional style of worship, including choir and organ music with hymns I know and can join in with; the variety of services with lots of church members involved and the wealth of social and pastoral activities and with lots of volunteers taking part - the load is spread.

Not least may I commend all those who give their time visiting those who struggle to get out and about – a real expression of God’s love in that the church reaches out to all in need.

So when people knock on our door and experience this sense of warmth, it is often as a prelude to arranging for the Baptism of their children. In the few lines from Matthews’s gospel we heard earlier, Jesus tells his disciples to “Go and make disciples of all nations, Baptising in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

The hard work of our Baptism visiting teams is one of our ministries that go largely hidden as they visit parents at home to explain the intricacies of the service and it’s no coincidence that people love the way we do Baptism here at St. Michael’s for we

are now booking celebrations in June next year. But where do these folk go? We have seen an increase in the number of young families who worship with us frequently and it's a real joy to have them with us but what can we do to help those children, parents and those friends who support them grow in their journey of faith?

As we are called to assist in God's work to make disciples let us examine what the word means, for if we ask many people what the word 'disciple' means they will tell you that it means 'a follower' While this is not exactly wrong, it is not exactly right either. The word disciple means a learner (as indeed does the Greek word *mathetes* which was the word used to describe the first followers of Jesus). A disciple, then, is someone who learns. They did this in the case of Jesus and his disciples by following him, listening to his teaching, watching his interaction with others and by asking questions. They became disciples by following but when they did follow they became people who learnt.

I say this because it is all too easy to forget. The popular usage of the word 'disciple' these days in Christian circles is for new Christians: they are the ones who do discipleship courses. Indeed discussions of discipleship often focus around making new disciples or encouraging very recent disciples. The implication of this is that more established Christians have no need for courses or indeed further learning.

The discomfiting challenge that the simple use of 'disciple' to describe people of the Christian faith raises is whether you can really be a disciple if you are no longer learning. Of course learning takes many shapes and forms. We may, like the early followers of Jesus absorb His teaching by walking with him. Two points seem to emerge out of the gospel accounts. The first is that the disciples learnt as much from Jesus' self as from his words. It was their following of him: their hanging around with him, breaking bread, asking questions, getting things wrong that was as much a part of their learning as the moments when he taught them. The second is that even though they had the best teacher imaginable the disciples did not complete their learning in one, two or even three years. Peter and the others were still in dire need of learning at the end of Jesus' ministry.

The call to be a disciple was and remains a life-long call to learning from and about Jesus. As a result the question 'what are you learning at the moment?', is one for which we must all have a ready answer. We are called not just to follow, but in doing so to open ourselves to the challenging, transforming power of the one who calls us to be learners of Christ.

The tremendous dedication of our Sunday School Teachers and our young people who contribute to the life of our church on a weekly basis and through participating in our All Age Worship is a testament to their enthusiasm and their commitment to learning about the Christian Faith.

But what do we also offer here at St. Michael's for older people who might want to be serious learners? We have for the past 7 years run an annual exploration in the shape of our Emmaus course. Listen to what those who have joined in this experience have to say:

Jenny Beeney remembers that “when I agreed to attend the Emmaus course, I was not sure why it would benefit me. I soon found it a great pleasure to attend and be able to talk to like minded people about the bible and our beliefs. I also found out that our beliefs could be very different too. It enabled me to ask questions and get answers to verses from the Bible that had puzzled me from childhood. Our very small group from differing walks of life soon proved to me the value of sitting down and talking about our life experiences; evaluating what our beliefs were and how we came to them. It was absolutely fascinating and we became a group of friends. We could talk in confidence to each other, study the Bible with study notes and make sense of some with the Rector's help. One of our group was using the course for their confirmation and so we were able to help him and be there at his confirmation as his supporters. I found this a great honour and was very proud how far we had come. I would recommend attending to just have quiet space to think about God and to read the Bible with friends, away from the day to day hustle and bustle. My faith journey continues helped by the Emmaus course led by the Rector.”

Nikki says she joined the Emmaus course because “I wanted to refresh my faith and find a little more about what I believed and why I believed it. The course was an excellent way of rediscovering the written word, making friends and helping others to talk through issues that worried them and discover a little bit more about themselves. We had lots of laughs and always felt ready for the pressures of the world again after each session. I would recommend it to anyone who needs to renew or confirm what they believe or just to discover a bit more about the Church as a community of faith.”

Fiona acknowledges that “Reading the scriptures individually can be very confusing and, at times, contradictory; the Emmaus Course has helped me to better understand the message relayed in the Bible through discussions with the Group and the Rector and I look forward to learning more through other similar groups which may be arranged in the future. Again, during the Course, the encouragement and warmth was very noticeable.

Russell recalls that “having spent too many years in the wilderness as far as my religion is concerned, my curiosity lead me to an “Alpha” course at my previous Church, though enlightening I was not totally satisfied with the answers I obtained. The thought of an Emmaus course intrigued me, so I embarked on what has turned out to be the most enlightening few months of my life and I shall be sorry when it ends. Life is a journey and I feel I should have taken a deeper investigation much earlier.”

Brenda Mason said she found the Emmaus Course especially helpful in focussing on specific Bible passages and giving the opportunity for reflection in a small group and Wyn Hunt has enjoyed the Lent and Emmaus Groups that foster the opportunity to get to know people better.

Jenny Searle also said that the Emmaus course was helpful because it gives time to consider and discuss what it means to be a Christian and you get to know others in the group.

So whether or not you have been confirmed, I'd encourage you to join in next year's course – please give your name and phone number to Sally or John our Churchwardens or have a chat with me – you'd be very welcome!

We also of course, offer support to those who are getting married and those who are bereaved. Next year our Patronal Festival is celebrating marriage and we invite anyone who has a connection with us through marriage to join with us then.

Our annual service for those who have lost a loved one during the last two years took place again this week with over 200 people invited to a service of reflection and celebration and many who came expressed their thanks.

As you can see, much is going on at St. Michael's but please come along to our discussions on the 28th November and help us to do what we do better or maybe you would like to offer a different way of supporting others in their journey of Faith.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen