

Sermon preached on 15th March at St Oswald's and 22nd March at Harewood Chapel

Throughout history, the human race has built monuments to whatever its held sacred, Stonehenge, Roman temples, the pyramids, cathedrals and churches. It's human nature to want something fixed in stone or brick.

Although these buildings seem to be permanent, we know that many have in the past been destroyed by war or earthquake, or purely by the passing of the years and neglect.

The temple in Jerusalem was one such place, a magnificent place, dedicated to worship, and reminding people of the relationship between them and God. Today's reading (John 2.13-22) tells of Jesus cleansing the temple of all those who were abusing and taking advantage of others in the name of religion.

Here in Collingham we have this beautiful, if somewhat compact church which has been used for worship for hundreds of years. If walls could talk what stories we would hear. I love the thought that thousands of people have prayed within these walls. Over the centuries, generations have come here to celebrate the joyful occasions in their lives, and also to find comfort in desperate and sad times.

People who have walked through those doors have lived through world wars, plagues, invasions, floods and any other event you might choose from the history books. For every single one of those people, from whichever century, the basic human condition applies. Human beings laugh and cry, live and die.

Through all the centuries the people of this village will have looked to St Oswald's, and at Harewood to the chapel (although not for quite as long) to mark the traditional Christian festivals, Christmas, and Easter, to celebrate weddings and Baptisms, to provide a place of quiet and support in times of sadness or trouble. The building is important, of course it is. But a church in its biblical meaning isn't made of brick or stone, it's made up of people.

Throughout the Bible, God has called people to be his hands, feet and voices to the world, more often than not he called those who seemed the least able, those who didn't want the job, to do his work. In the New Testament Jesus calls the most unlikely bunch of people to be the ones who spread the good news to the world. They were mainly uneducated, poor, and prone to mistakes.

Are we are by God, each and every one of us, to be here? Yes. Is coming to worship the only thing that we are called to do? No. I believe that God has a plan for us. We are called to be Jesus' hands, voices and feet on earth. How does that call work in practice? Does it just apply to people in our own congregation? People like us?

I believe God calls us to help and support our fellow human beings, all of them. I know that many of you are already involved in many things which help and support others. Some of you visit the housebound, cook for those who aren't able to. Use your many skills to support all sorts of charities.

As a church we give to charity and are involved in other ways with the community. Is what we do, good? Yes, of course it is. Is it enough, and is it appropriate? I don't know; neither did the PCC when this question was first broached last year.

The Church of England, as with any large organisation has fallen into the trap of using management-speak. There are reasons for this, though I won't go into them now.

All churches are expected to have a Mission Statement. Some of you may revel at the thought of composing one, some of you, like me may feel your hearts sink. Mission Statements align themselves in my mind to those of blue sky thinking, or 360 degree feedback. I accept that my initial reaction

probably dates back to my pre church days. (Now it's done I feel much more at ease and excited about the possibilities that just having this Mission Statement opens up for us as a church.)

Fortunately we have a wide range of skills and aptitudes on the PCC. More disciplined minds than mine focused on the fact that St Oswald's didn't have a Mission Statement and set about composing one. The PCC looked at some variations and we all decided on this.

'Our mission is to nurture the life-long worship of God in a relevant and meaningful way by sharing His love and making a positive difference to everyone in the community'.

Once we had decided on the final wording, what were we going to do about it? There's not much point having a Mission Statement and not doing anything with it. We want to share God's love with our community, we want to make a difference, but we need to figure out first what we already do, so as to have a grounded starting point.

After much discussion it was decided to prepare a consultation document to find out where we are as a church. To get as complete a picture as possible, we need every person connected to either St Oswald's or Harewood Chapel, to contribute their thoughts and ideas. (There is a separate sheet for the children). Once we have a full picture from church members we can ask the wider community what it would like /need from us.

Today we are launching our Review and Consultation Document. There are envelopes at the back for everyone on St Oswald's Electoral Roll. Please take yours, and if a church member lives close to you please take theirs.

Any left will be sent out tomorrow. IF for any reason you don't receive a copy, or you are not on the ER, there are spare copies available. I would urge you to fill it in and bring back to church or the Vicarage. Once all are returned (by the 17th April) a small group will analyse the results and in due course report on the findings.

Once we have a fuller picture of how people view church, and how individuals express their faith in the wider community, we can begin to work out what else is needed, and how we can go about achieving it.

God has called us. I believe he has called us, his children, to work out our faith in serving others. True religion isn't practised on mountain tops, sacred temples, cathedrals or churches; true religion is practised in our hearts, through the spirit of God.

The temple that Jesus cleansed could and would be destroyed in the near future, but the temple of God within the human soul will not and cannot perish.

Although we worship in this beautiful building and our faith is enriched by our surroundings, we must always remember that God isn't contained only within these walls. God isn't contained in temples or churches or cathedrals, he is everywhere.

Because we love God, because we believe in Jesus, we are called to work out our faith by serving others using the gifts that we have each been given. As a church community and as individuals I know there are amazing things being done for others. I believe that this consultation is the beginning of us being even more effective Christians to the wider world.

God lives in our hearts. We are the living stones of God's church, housing the commandment of love and taking that love to others. AMEN.

Revd Maria Pallis
March 2009