



## Choosing the messy organism over the comfortable club

I've been going to church for a lot of years, with some gaps, for most of my life: in tiny churches in rural Kent, in inner city Birmingham, in a Norman church in east London, in cathedrals, on the beach, in fields and hospital and prison chapels. I have never in all my church going, experienced a more joyful Easter day than last Sunday here at St James's. With so many singers, trumpeters, hallelujahs, flowers and sheer fun, it was joyful. Not forcedly happy but joyful.

And this week, after this service, at our APCM (the church's AGM) we have the equal joy of the annual accounts, elections and reports on the year's activities!

And yes, you're smiling because you can hear the joy, of accounts, elections and reports, and I'm making a bit of a joke out of it; but, actually, it's this business that makes our church what it is; the infrastructure that binds together the disparate and different aspects of this community who can cry Crucifixion on Good Friday and sing Hallelujah on Easter Day.

When we gather on Sundays in these weeks after Easter, through April and May, we'll hear story after story from the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The stories of little communities, trying to work out what they were doing after the momentous events of Jesus's life, death and resurrection, trying to devise ways of organising themselves. The Acts of the Apostles is a handbook for start-up religion in a dangerous time. You will have heard me say before, but it's particularly worth saying on the day of an APCM, the book is not called "The Wish List of the Apostles" or the "Beliefs of the Apostles", "The Audited Accounts of the Apostles" or, very importantly, it's not called the "Strategic Plan of the Apostles". It's the Acts of the Apostles; the story of what they did, the mistakes they made, the relationships they formed, the church they built. It's a book full of difficult journeys, arguments about money and church collections. It's a book full of elections (they did it by drawing lots) and fractious meetings about who had authority over whom.

The disciples went quickly from the heady dramatic emotional joy of Mary Magdalene ("I have seen the Lord") and running themselves to find an empty tomb, to the more brow furrowing business of "so what do we do now?"

What they did do, we read in our gospel this morning and we will read others over the coming weeks. They went back home, or back to work. And there, as in today's gospel, they locked the door. They hunkered down. Stayed with the people they knew.

On the day of an APCM, it's a good chance to pause and think a bit about what kind of church we want to be, in the light of these Easter gospels, in the light of the huge political changes in the UK in the last 12 months, in the light of the referendum which showed London becoming more and more different from the rest of the UK. What kind of church, right here in the centre of the capital, do we want to be?

We are a gathered church, that is we mostly travel in to come to church, maybe 40 minutes on the tube, or a couple of buses, on a bike or in a car. And often city life is pretty overwhelming: work, rent, mortgage, family, neighbours. So, we want to come to church to re-charge our batteries and see people we know. In lots of ways, there's nothing much wrong with that. It might feel like a rare chance in the week to sit still, to have some space; to hunker down and be in a familiar place for a bit.

Fair enough. And especially fair enough when life is pretty hard, when I'm ill or sad, or scared. I come for some safe space and encouragement.

But although this might be that kind of space when we need it, in the light of the deep mystery of resurrection life, this hunkering down, staying with the people we know, metaphorically locking the doors, can't be our core DNA, what we are at our heart.

This week I had lunch with the chairmen of the three clubs in St James's Square. The three clubs are in our parish: the Army and Navy, the Naval and Military and the East India Club. Gentlemen's clubs, all of whom now admit women, but gentlemen's clubs all the same. It struck me as I met with them that these chairmen of the clubs know what they are for; there are dress codes and entrance requirements, membership is controlled, fees are paid, recommendations are given. We had things in common to discuss, not least the St James's Square garden party, where the church has a stall, but more immediately the huge hike in business

rates imposed on all of us by Westminster Council. For information, we at the church have received a demand for a 46% increase in what we pay from April 2017, which will blow a hole in this year's budget as it has blown a hole in theirs. Often club members will come to church here on a Sunday or a concert on a Saturday; they are friends and neighbours.

It struck me further though as I walked back from the Square that I found it helpful to think about the differences between a club and a church, because often the church is negatively described as or accused of becoming some kind of club.

It may not be that we hunker down in a large leather armchair with a cigar, or like the first disciples hunker down behind locked doors; but the instinct is similar. The instinct to find a place we can retreat to, where the demands of real life recede; where we can hide for a while and spend time with, as the TV mockumentary of the 1990s called them, PLU – "people like us".

But however strong this instinct, and however initially attractive it seems, it can't be what a church is, according to the gospel message of resurrection life.

Clubs attract members who are similar to each other. It's a mark of their success.

If churches do only that, then they are failing.

Clubs have a dress code; it's one of the ways they control behaviour and membership.

If churches have a dress code that determines who can come in, we are failing.

Clubs will want to work hard to grow their membership to ensure their own survival.

If churches do that for their own sake then we are failing.

Why is a church not a club? Because as a former Rector of this church said, (William Temple 1936) we exist for the people who do not belong.

Or as our plan says, by celebrating the Eucharist together we learn that God's love is for all. And so, we understand ourselves to be an outward looking church. Open hearted, open minded, with no dress code, no membership criteria but a community who want to live somehow in the light of the extraordinary mystery of resurrection.

And how on earth we live this resurrection life in 21<sup>st</sup> century London is a huge challenge.

There are two suggestions I want to make this morning about this. One is theological. One is pastoral.

The theological aspect is that in the story of Holy Week and Easter that we have just told, we learn that God on the cross of Good Friday becomes completely undefended; God is put at the mercy of human hubris, self-regard, fear and abuse of power. God is in this way, self-dispossessing. We also learn in the half light of dawn on Easter day, that in the empty tomb, the forces of death had not triumphed. God was revealed to be not only undefended but undefeated.

In the pattern of this central story, we find our DNA. Not a club or a self-help group or a political party or a campaign group, although we may from time to time do all those things. In the pattern of this story, a church becomes an organism that is essentially self-dispossessing. Willing to risk everything, lose everything and hold open doors for others to have their own needs and interests realised before our own. It's a totally different way of looking at fulfilment, joy. It means that I am not well if you are not well. We are not fulfilled until they are fulfilled; it's not a 'zero sum' game. Abundance is the name of the game.

The second reflection I want to offer us is more pastoral because Thomas helps us in his personality which comes through strongly from the gospels. I like Thomas; he's very human. Previously, he'd got impatient with Jesus when Jesus had suddenly got all mysterious and started talking in riddles: *I am going but you know the way because you've been with me.* Thomas can't be doing with all this mysteriousness. He interrupts him, "I don't know the way," he says. "How can we know the way?"

Another time, he gets all fervent (when Jesus was going to go to Bethany but they were worried he'd be stoned to death). Thomas gets very enthusiastic suddenly and says, "Let's all go and then we will die with him!"

And now he's being perhaps a bit belligerent, understandably so, "I'm not going to believe this story unless I put my hands in his wounds. I need proof".

In a life of faith, all these impulses are recognisable to us. We swing, sometimes within half an hour, or over a lifetime, from "I have no idea what I'm doing" or "I don't know the way I should go" to "Yes. I really get this. I'm going to throw myself into this" to "Well it all sounds amazing but where's the proof. Oh blimey, what if there isn't even a God?"

These are Thomas's questions...and they're often our questions too.

Putting these two reflections together, we get a sense of who we might be asked to be: a community of people who know the grief and trauma of our own Good Fridays and still trust in Easter Day, who are willing

only to be fulfilled only when others are. Who are willing to say to our neighbours, “I am well only when you are well.”

And it also means that we live, accepting our questions like Thomas; all our nagging questions about “Did it happen?” “What does it mean?” “and what am I supposed to do about it” the most we can say, and it’s absolutely huge in saying it, is that without the proof and forensic logic we often crave, without this (gloriously and fabulously without it) we will *stake ourselves*, and we will take the risk of trying to be church. Not a club, not a group of like-minded individuals, not a neat institution but Church; messy, sometimes conflicted, joyful, willing to grieve with one another, making our way in a world not only full of spiritual realities like glory and sin but a world full of budgets, employment laws, appraisals, planning authorities and meetings.

On a day of an annual general meeting, the relationship between those aspects of our life is brought to the fore; and we are saved from any sense that we are dealing in fantasy religion by our commitment to be a good employer, to reducing our carbon footprint, by our commitment to carefully plan for the future of our buildings, by our fair dealings with our suppliers. These things save us from fantasy faith, keep us rooted in the real world where all of us are required to live and where the challenge of living out Good Friday and Easter Day is sharper than ever. May it be our genuine joy to try. Amen.