



getting into the spirit....

I was recently at a meeting when members of this congregation were asked for two words to sum up, if they could, their experience of St James's Church. Many of the words were truly amazing – humbling - “transformational” said one, “joyful, difficult, life changing, challenging”. Someone said, with a bit of a wry smile, “inescapable” – someone else simply – “one body” – and someone else said something really interesting, insightful – which was “sneakily self-righteous”

I don't know why you've chosen to come this morning – and if you're visiting us, you're especially welcome – but I hope you get the sense that we are a community of Christians who want to try to live out in our own lives individually and also corporately as a church, as much as we can of our faith in the world. We do want to say that we're trying – to love, to forgive, to give ourselves over to the task of caring for creation and building a more just society in the name of Christ. And if you'd like to join in anything that we're up to, please do speak to anyone here – or visit our website.

But of course we here are part of a wider church – a global church – the Anglican Communion. And we wouldn't be here without that wider historic story or current international community.

But I suppose I want to ask you this morning, given the gospel reading and where we are in the year; how do you relate to “church”? If I were putting it in academic terms, what is your ecclesiology? What do you think “church” is? What place does church have in your everyday life? Perhaps “church” is something that is just there – I don't know if your work colleagues or friends know that one of the communities you belong to is a church? Perhaps sometimes you don't want to be identified with some of the public profile of the “church” – it's such a loaded word (by the way it just means “assembly” – it just means “meeting” really) – but it of course carries much more weight than that, and not always positively.

But yesterday in the Diocese of London – our Diocese- history was made when the 133rd Bishop of London was installed into her – her – seat at St Paul's Cathedral. Sarah's appointment as our Bishop is a sign in itself that things don't have to be as they are. And although movement is often too slow for many, movement does happen. Change is gonna come.... And it's something to be so glad about.

But keeping in mind a story Kate Bottley – who is an Anglican priest and radio 2 presenter – told in this church a couple of years ago – when she told her 19 year old hairdresser – isn't it great that women can be bishops now (the vote had just happened). Yes said her hairdresser – yes it's fantastic. Pause. “so - what's a bishop”?

The gap between church talk and normal talk is often very large. And while once, you would have been fulfilling your social obligation to belong to a church – even a couple of generations ago – you would have been coming here partly in order to be more respectable – now it's arguably the opposite. You are doing something subversive, counter cultural – by belonging to a Christian church. It's a minority sport. Even though more people in London attend a church on a Sunday than attend a football match on a Saturday – it's still something that you are doing against the grain.

But what kind of church is it? Last week, the Radio 4 Thought for the Day contributor, Angela Tilby, caused a bit of a stir when she wrote a column for the Church Times pleading that we be saved from the “Evangelical take over” of the Church of England. Her main target was a new programme – this is its third year - which runs from Ascension – which was on Thursday – to Pentecost – next Sunday. So we're in it now. It's a 10 day period of prayer and activity across the church called *Thy Kingdom Come*. There is a big event at St Paul's Cathedral next Saturday – and they're expecting more than 2000 people to go.

Angela's criticism has been sharp. The marketing for this programme is good, she says – in order to appeal to different wings of the church. There is

an element of social action to appease the left, she says, it uses language such as a novena of prayer to placate the Catholics and people who like liturgical seasons will be pleased that it is a programme held in this previously un-loved 10 day period between Ascension and Pentecost. But at its heart, she says, whatever the marketing intended to indicate its broad appeal, there is what she calls an evangelical assumption that disciples must be made one by one individually, in order for the church to grow. And what's more, growth of numbers of people who are committed to the church, especially in the face of declining congregations, is the only name of the Christian game.

You will all have your own thoughts about what she's said. And I'd be really interested to hear them.....

The question remains: what does church mean to you? Is it something you go to as an individual, or do you have a sense of us being in this together?

It does seem to me that the gap between what we think we're up to in here and the understanding of that "out there" is very wide. And one experience of this is in the church's interaction with the state. Some of you will know that a while ago, I attended a court hearing as a witness for a person whose conversion to Christianity meant that he felt he had to claim asylum in the UK because it wasn't safe to go back to his country. For those who have been asking, there is still no news, 2 months after the hearing.

In order to prepare, I listened to a set of questions often used by the Home Office to find out if a person's conversion is genuine or not. Some of the questions were relevant to this time of year – we're celebrating Pentecost next week. "What is the significance of Pentecost?" Where is it mentioned in the Bible? Which disciples described Pentecost? Which of Jesus's relatives were at Pentecost?

I don't know how many of you will know the answers to those questions. And of course, I have a lot of sympathy for Home Office staff as individuals, trying to find ways to assess what is ultimately something that is not measurable.

But it occurred to me that the very act of interrogation on the subject of Pentecost, on the subject of the Holy Spirit, goes to the heart of one of the core teachings of Jesus, that got his own followers into trouble and should get us as a church into trouble too: should send us to courts

to bear witness to the teaching of Christ that it is the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law, that as the gospel today puts it *sanctifies us in the truth*.

This period of 10 days between the Feast of the Ascension and Pentecost next week is one where the church – collectively – is asked to pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit. This 10 day period when we pray for the coming of the Holy Spirit brings into very sharp relief the fact that church can never just be a social club, or a political pressure group; it will be a gathering of people who, however tentatively, want to take their spirituality seriously. This is not always easy and it's definitely risky.

It's risky because if we are praying and acting together as people who take our spirituality seriously, then these movements of the Spirit will get us into trouble and will take us to the courts not only of the legal variety but the courts of public opinion and church authority. And in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles today, we heard that Peter stood up in front of the church – all of them – and it was about 120 people. That's fewer people than are in this church today. Look around. You were it. With no plan and no programme. And a whole lot of opposition and threat ahead of you. Why would you continue if you didn't have a sense somewhere too deep for words that God was with you and the Spirit was inspiring you.

My hunch is that the movement of the Holy Spirit is often more hidden and seemingly more ordinary than we are expecting. Of course there are some extraordinary behaviours that some will point to as evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit. I know that many of you have attended, as I've attended, plenty of church worship sessions where people have been slain in the Spirit, spoken in tongues, and for the most part, I have also observed these behaviours being held well by charismatic leaders and worship song bands. This service might seem tame by comparison.

But the ordinariness in some ways of the celebration of the Eucharist, with the eating and drinking of a crowd, sharing the same cup, breaking the same bread, is, for me, in its sacrament and silence, as charismatic and authentic an indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit as the more extraordinary ways of praying described above.

It is part of the vocation of this community, this gathered church, to remain attentive within

society, community and church to the movement of the Spirit; to notice, and having noticed, to go with it; to cultivate in ourselves a deep desire to be where the Spirit is, and to want to join in what the Spirit is up to, whatever that is and however challenging we might find it. And from my experience, the signs of that Spirit have not been, in my lifetime anyway, the unexplained sound of a rushing wind or the sight of tongues of flame appearing in the assembly.

But the signs of the movement of the Spirit have been no less transforming than these, often only seen clearly in retrospect: sometimes tears of recognition, or the sudden release of joy, the laying down of a lifelong shame; or a deep and communal silence. Or, very importantly, daring to take a step of faith to serve the poorest people in our society, to welcome those who are suffering, to be fearless in the face of another's distress, and never to be too afraid to confront the cruelty and aggression of which we are all capable, and ask for that violence to be dissolved by forgiveness and love.

The movement of the Spirit, in the Genesis sense, can be a brooding presence over a life that lasts for a while before that life, marked by chaos, is transformed by a stirring of creativity and

liberation. And so, for me, the Holy Spirit's agency in the world is more like the movement of tectonic plates: long term, often hidden, living by a different timetable, moving by a different force, and from time to time, like tectonic plates, causing eruptions of energy or creativity that can leave us with a mountain to climb or an earthquake that shakes the very foundations of life.

It's this way of living that we are baptising Evelyn into today. And reminding ourselves of our own promises, made for us, or made ourselves.

What is "church" for you? What place does your belonging to it have in your day? In your spirit?

I long for the day when we can get beyond labels, beyond church tribal allegiances and stop being afraid, either of standing up for what we believe in, or for hearing what someone else believes, especially when it's different.

But never abandoning our desire – together – however we do it - to listen for the movement of the Spirit who, however hard we try to organise her, blows where she wills. Amen.

Lucy Winkett