

13.03.2011 K and K

Readings: Ruth Ch 2 verses 1 to 23
Matthew Chapter 9 verses 9 to 13.

Theme: 'Being a Caring Church'
Sub-theme 'The Church for Others'

1.

Our readings today have spelt out two main precepts of our theme 'The Church for Others'

In our reading from Ruth we learn how Boaz welcomed a complete stranger into his workforce.

In our reading from Matthew the striking thing is that Matthew was no stranger! He was very well known.....and hated. An outcast. Despised and loathed.

The other disciples, when confronted by some of the Pharisees, were about to be put on the spot! The Pharisees were aghast at Jesus' behaviour, mixing and socialising with 'outcasts'. Good job Jesus had good hearing and intervened before any damage was done!

The message is clear from our readings. Jesus expects us to love those who are outside our 'comfort zone', outside our precious traditions.

2.

We do not need to be reminded that the church is not a building but a company of believers. A mobile workforce to put it another way.

The church building is little more than our base from which to operate.

I have very fond childhood memories of services occasionally being held at a farm near the village where we lived on the Cheshire/Derbyshire border.

We used the barn if the weather was wet but the idea was to hold the services out among the foothills of Kinder Scout. I was really moved by these occasions. More over people came to those services who would never set foot inside the church building. The fellowship over farmhouse soup and freshly baked bread was just wonderful. Christian hospitality at it's best. It was in people's HOMES that Jesus drew people to God.

3

Sometimes there are situations where we act or speak without giving a thought to how this impacts on others.

I know a Deacon who visited new comers to the community in the course of his duties.

He asked people about there lives, but he wasn't really interested.

He had one eye on the clock. He shared nothing of himself. At a given point he said 'I think we should have a word of prayer now'. He showed no respect for their feelings. He didn't even ask them if there was anything they would like to contribute to the prayer!

I won't repeat what people in that community said about this man later on! How much better it would have been if he had asked people if they felt comfortable with praying. Even encouraging them with their own PRIVATE prayer.

We read in Matthew chapter 5 that Jesus advised 'when you pray, go to your room, close the door, and pray to your Father in heaven'

4.

Jesus was a master at being able to, first and foremost, understand and recognise other people's FEELINGS.

5.

Once upon a time there were several women in the church Prayer Group who were visiting an elderly friend who was ill. After a while they rose to leave and told her "We'll do what we can to help. We promise to keep you in our prayers". "Thank you" she said "But really I can do my own praying. The thing I can't do are those dishes in the sink".

6.

It makes me think. Do we neglect to pray for ourselves? Are we too busy praying for others? Do we not need to sit and be quiet and pray that we might be granted wisdom to try and put ourselves in the other person's shoes.

Are we too over enthusiastic and so convinced that we HAVE to tell 'the Good News' according to 'the gospel of me' that we fail to even start to appreciate that we are having a normal 'conversation'. Do we fail to value the other person's point of view, or respect their feelings?

7.

One of the books I treasure is called 'Christianity Re-discovered'. It was written by a Roman Catholic Priest, Vincent Donovan, who went out to work with the Massai Tribe in East Africa.

Vincent Donovan was acutely aware of not only the tribal beliefs and customs held by the Massai but also that until slavery came along the people had well ordered lives. The Arab slave traders and their European backers wreaked havoc, confusion and misery unimaginable.

Victorian evangelists tried to 'impose' Western style Christianity upon the people even to the extent of arranging 'Christian' marriages among them in the hope that by settling them as Christian families in villages, farms and mission compounds that there would be a great 'conversion' which would reach gigantic proportions. The opposite happened. Christianity did NOT take off!

Vincent Donovan realised that 'The Gospel' could only be meaningful through the eyes of the Massai. He worked without all the 'missionary paraphernalia'. No schools, buildings or compounds. He took no pre-conceived ideas about God, Christ, salvation, the church or anything else traditionally associated with Christianity.

He took the message of Jesus to those who did not believe in him and had perhaps never heard of him.

Two things came together. The gospel and that sacred, spiritual, part of people's lives.

What evolved was a 'new church', a different conception to our own but one which the Massai understood THROUGH THE UNDERSTANDING OF THEIR OWN CULTURE.

God's spirit works in mysterious ways.

8

We take a mental jump to India where there are people who are called Dalits. These people are the 'lowest of the low'. They number 17 million, and are made up of Hindus, Muslims and Christians.

They suffer gross indignity. They are viewed as being too low to be even part of the caste system and are excluded from the economic benefits afforded to others.

To be a Dalit today means having to live in a degrading sub-human culture. They suffer assault, rape and death at the hands of others.

The caste system has officially been abolished in India but, particularly in the countryside, Dalits are still classed as 'untouchables' In the cities there are some who have achieved public office but this is rare.

Recognition in society is slow to be achieved

9

The church is a contradiction in terms unless it is actively connected with those who are marginalised in society, such as the Dalits. Those who are poor, disabled, those who are ill, mentally or physically, those who are dying.

This Christian work does not happen within the four stone walls of a church building but out in our communities.

‘Bums on pews’ may be desirable but how infinitely more important is helping to bring people to a knowledge and love of God in THEIR own way.

10.

I have told this story before. It brings a tear to my eye to relate it again. When I came to live on Luing in 1995 I had given up any hope of attending church ever again. I can't hear a word. I can't hear the music.

I decided to give church one last go. I attended a service on Luing led by Bob Brown.

I sat at the front desperately trying to understand even ONE word he was saying. Bob noticed. He came over to me during the first hymn and said “I can see you are deaf. Do you lipread?” I said “I try”. He said “I will look at you when I am speaking. The others can hear me” After the service he gave me his sermon notes to take home and read.

Freda came and built on that by providing me with a full copy of her service notes. Martin, Aileen, Chris and others do likewise. It helps a great deal, as long as someone can point out where we are up to.

No church I had ever attended had taken any notice of my deafness, or considered steps to help me participate.

The future of Christianity rests ‘with others’. But that future depends on us. ‘The Church for OTHERS’ is our theme. May we all be granted the wisdom to understand what this REALLY means. Amen