

## **Sermon - St John's Hurst Green - Sunday 16th November 2014 by Rev Anna Eltringham - Feedback following the Away Day on Saturday 8th November 2014**

Last Saturday a good number of people went from St John's to the Diocesan retreat house called Wychcroft, not far from here. I always think it's a slightly strange name for a Christian retreat centre... but once you're there it's a very holy and special place not a dark den of pagan rites and rituals! And we were there to consider where God might want us to focus our activities here at St John's as we move forward.

We all agreed at the end of the day that it would be appropriate to use the sermon slot to feed back on the key points of the day which is what I plan to do this morning.

To immerse ourselves in how Jesus approached mission we started the day reflecting on that wonderful passage, the woman at the well. An amazing account of one woman's meeting with Jesus. And it shows us so many things a few of them I'll mention here.

First, Jesus wants to take us as he took his disciples out of our comfort zone and into those areas and with those people we may not normally meet but who are all welcomed into the heart of God. Are we prepared to be stretched and taken out of our comfort zone?

Secondly, when Jesus does this he meets people where they are and helps them discover true worship where they are not expecting them to come to the holy places of Jerusalem or Samaria. Do we get over absorbed with getting people to church whereas maybe we need to reach out and meet people where they are?

Third, Jesus transforms lives, as he did the woman who was desperately isolated and in desperate need. Jesus changes lives and inspires people to live life to the full and share his gift of love and sustaining life with others. Do we believe this? How far has God transformed our lives and are we open to sharing that hope with others?

With these thoughts in the back of our mind we then reviewed the information gathered from most of you so far. Many of you have fed into small groups or answered questionnaires and we summarised the key findings for different age groups and shared some initial ideas.

We then came to a particularly moving part of the day where we all considered our own Christian journeys and those moments that had been significant along the way. People shared very personal testimonies and it helped us find things in common. For example, how formative our childhood and teenage years had been for many of us in the Christian faith be it Sunday school, school, youth clubs, confirmation etc. Secondly, how often it had been a Christian individual, sometimes known to us well, sometimes not, who may have said something to us at a particular time in our lives that made all the difference. For others church worship, a particular service or church course which has played a significant part. I encourage all of you on a personal prayerful level to do this exercise sometime. To reflect upon your life journey and where you really felt your relationship with God come alive and consider why.

So this helped us identify 5 areas which we summarised as important aspects in discovering a Faith in God in the first place and then deepening it over time and thus areas which we as a church should give time and attention to. Those areas were:

- 1) Childhood
- 2) Initial encounter and creating faith - welcome at church, or through a friend for example.
- 3) Nurturing and deepening faith to some sense of active serving in faith.
- 4) Worship especially invitation to special services
- 5) Building and deepening friendship with those in the community

These are very broad themes but small groups came up with particular areas we might work on and we all then voted to determine the priorities for the next year. So specifically we agreed to focus and work on:

- What we offer to 0-11 year olds and how we sow the seeds and begin to nurture their faith for the future;
- Developing our welcome. Not just being friendly but helping people move from a first visit here or meeting with one of us in the community to coming more regularly and beginning to discover what God might hope for them in their lives.
- And thirdly to reach out and connect with the most isolated and marginalised in our community.

There are many areas we may have considered. But this is an ongoing process and we had to start somewhere. Much better to do things in a manageable way and hopefully make some clear progress quickly we can build on over time.

I believe our Gospel reading today speaks into this time for us at St John's. The parable of the talents reminds us that if we have gifts and we step out and use them those gifts will bear fruit. Every one of us here has God given gifts that can be used for the glory of God, to build up God's Kingdom of love, justice and peace and to draw people into the embrace of God. We as the body of Christ in this community have a great gift too. The gift of Jesus, his love, mercy, friendship and life to share with all those who live in this place. People like us and those not like us. God is challenging us not to be like the lazy servant and do nothing. But to get up, get out and do something. To build on the wonderful heritage of St John's of doing God's work here and now.

But one thing has struck me. Some of these themes may not be so different to priorities that have emerged every time a new vicar comes to St John's and has an away day and helps people focus on what we should be doing. And that's all ok because God's themes and priorities don't change. Children are always high on the agenda 'let the little children come to me'. The Marginalised and isolated are always those Jesus is most interested in. 'Blessed are the poor because they will inherit the Kingdom of God'. But what we are challenged to do is re-think and re-fresh how we focus on these priorities for **this** generation.

Just before the service we had here last Wednesday evening to inaugurate the new Oxted team of churches I had to stand before the bishop and hold a bible and make a declaration of assent in other words swear my loyalty before God to the tradition of the faith and the church. One of the things we agree to in this declaration is to proclaim the faith of Jesus Christ **AFRESH** in this generation and those in our care.

We live in a very different age to 30-40 years ago when nothing much happened on a Sunday except church. People are hugely busy and taken up with all sorts of things. Many have had little or no exposure to the Christian Faith and may have hardly even stepped inside a building like this. Within the areas we feel called to focus on (children, welcome and those who are isolated) how do we do them differently here and now and for this generation? What will make sure that those we care for have a real life-giving and life-changing encounter with Jesus like the Samaritan woman at the well - a different place and a different generation. That, my friends, is our challenge. And it will only be by ongoing prayer and openness to God's Holy Spirit that we will be able to get up, get out and do something about it.

Amen

## A FINAL THOUGHT

In memory of Oscar Romero (1917–1980)

### *A Future Not Our Own*

It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.  
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,  
it is beyond our vision.

We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction  
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.  
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of  
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.  
No statement says all that could be said.  
No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession  
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.  
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.  
No set of goals and objectives include everything.

This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one  
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted  
knowing that they hold future promise.  
We lay foundations that will need further development.  
We provide yeast that produces effects  
far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of  
liberation in realising this.  
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.  
It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,  
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's  
grace to enter and do the rest.  
We may never see the end results, but that is the  
difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not  
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.

### *From Xavarian Missionaries:*

*Oscar A. Romero, Archbishop of San Salvador, in El Salvador, was assassinated on March 24, 1980, while celebrating Mass in a small chapel in a cancer hospital where he lived. He had always been close to his people, preached a prophetic gospel, denouncing the injustice in his country and supporting the development of popular and mass organisations. He became the voice of the Salvadoran people when all other channels of expression had been crushed by the repression.*

*This prayer was composed by Bishop Ken Untener of Saginaw, drafted for a homily by Card. John Dearden in November 1979 for a celebration of departed priests. As a reflection on the anniversary of the martyrdom of Bishop Romero, Bishop Untener included it in a reflection titled "The mystery of the Romero Prayer." The mystery is that the words of the prayer are attributed to Oscar Romero, but they were never spoken by him.*