

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

**A Healthy Church - Facing the cost of change and growth . (Mark 4)**

April 20<sup>th</sup> 2008      Acts 7.55-60, John 14.1-14

The question posed by this week's 'mark of a healthy church' is 'how far is St Mark's, as a church prepared to face the costs and challenges involved in change and growth?'

We were graphically reminded in the first reading that facing a cost was written into the Christian Way from the very beginning. St Stephen, the first Christian martyr, was part of a movement of change and growth which some people found inspiring, and others deeply threatening. In the end, those who were threatened had their way – so Stephen, that man 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit' met his death by stoning – but in the manner of his dying he contributed to even more change and growth in the church, through the effect these events had on the bystander, Saul.

We, in our day and culture, aren't called to face the cost and challenge of change and growth in such a dramatic and painful way. It may be that rehearsing the story of the martyrs, and listening to Jesus' command to 'take up our cross and follow him', makes 'facing the cost' seem something horrific, but remote from our everyday experience as Christians.

But today we're asked to concentrate on what it means to face the cost of faithfulness within the ordinary fabric of church life. Because – make no mistake about it – change and growth is what we're called to. Not *necessarily* institutional change, nor change in our services, nor outward things like that – but we're certainly called, both as individual Christians and as a church, to an inward change that is never completed in this life – what St Paul describes in 2 Corinthians as being 'changed from glory to glory'. And this inward change, this growing faithfulness, isn't just a private or atomised, individualistic matter. It's something for the church as a community to share in together. And shared inner transformation sometimes, inevitably expresses itself in outward institutional changes, changes in how we do things, in how we express ourselves.

Outward changes in church life are sometimes seen as unwelcome tinkering – changing the services, for example. They don't seem very fruitful in drawing new people in, or 'attracting the young' – or whatever it is they were designed to do. I think that when that's the case, it's because the outward changes don't grow organically out of inner change and new perception. But when there is inner change – the transforming work of the Holy Spirit – it's fairly likely there'll be outward changes as well. The difference is, they'll feel authentic and fruitful.

You'll notice that as far as 'growth' is concerned, I've so far been talking mainly not about growth in numbers, but about growth in holiness, faithfulness, understanding and Christian maturity. I'm sure we should be looking for growth in numbers, too – in the sense of an 'overflow' of faith to others. And growth in numbers brings its own cost and challenges, too. But the place we should start when considering whether and to what extent we're willing and able to face the cost of change and growth is the question of being faithful in a costly way – faithful rather than outwardly successful.

So – what are some of the costs of change and growth in the terms I'm speaking of?

Last week Marguerite spoke about the issue of 'seeking to find out what God wants'. That's a good starting point. If this church takes that seriously on its agenda – and if we all do individually – we've begun to face the fundamental cost of faithfulness – 'not my will, but thine be done'. Sometimes you find people talking about 'my church', or 'our church'. When once we start sincerely praying, 'what do *you* want from this church, Lord?', then we've started acknowledging the very important truth that the church isn't ours – but his.

This isn't just a matter of changing to pious-sounding words when we talk about the church – it can be a very serious issue. People, whether clergy or laity, *do* take ownership of a church or congregation and resist all other views of what it might become. That's how some pretty awful conflicts are born in church circles – some of them, perhaps, not a million miles from here.

On the other hand, if fellow Christians are genuinely committed to 'finding out what God wants' – realising as Marguerite pointed out, the provisionality of all our discoveries of God's will along the way – then they may disagree with each other on their pilgrim path together, but in a completely different spirit. They are all trying to listen to God. Quakers, you know, aim only ever make decisions by consensus. If agreement can't be reached in a business meeting, they stop talking, and enter into silent worship for a while. If consensus isn't born from this, they leave the decision for another time, after more listening to the Spirit by all concerned. That's what I'd call costly – costly to our impatience, our 'do it now and do it my way' instinct to win in debate. We may not choose to follow the Quaker model exactly, but that spirit of mutual respect and prayerfulness in decision-making has something very important to say about the church belonging to God – not to us.

What other costs and challenges may follow if we seek to keep church life open to the Spirit's leading like that?

We may find we are called to do some things differently – to disturb the patterns we're comfortable with. I make no presumptions about what such

changes might be – but I do believe that openness often leads to movement.

In doing some things differently – perhaps following what seems to be a lead - we may make mistakes. We may get it wrong. We may have sometimes to give up a project which promised well, but has proved not to be God's purpose. So there's the cost of being honest, the cost sometimes of being disappointed, the cost of not being successful and good at everything we undertake. G.K Chesterton famously wrote that 'if a thing's worth doing, it's worth doing badly'. By which, of course, he didn't mean that we shouldn't give our best shot to everything we do – but neither should we be held back by a perfectionist anxiety which says 'we're not up to that. We can't do it well enough, it may not succeed, so let's not try.' Things done by amateurs (which, literally, means things done out of love for the doing of them) may be much more fruitful than things done with absolute professionalism. The first disciples were nothing if not amateurs in the business of preaching the Gospel and running communities of faith. They had to learn by following what seemed to be 'leads', sometimes from their mistakes, and sometimes

through failure. But with the Holy Spirit, they changed the world. So, humility, provisionality, and a humorous view of ourselves are part of the cost of change and growth. (Isn't it striking how alike humility and humour are, as words?)

A related cost of change and growth is the need to keep alert - alert to the community in which we're set, how it changes, what its needs are. It's no good having a grand programme of what St Mark's is, and does, which leaves us too busy to be alert to what's 'really happening'. And it's hard work keeping alert. Perhaps our prayer and intercession is a place where we should start - trying to make sure that we pray for the things which are genuinely concerning our local community - the use and enjoyment of the river, for example, spates of burglaries and those involved, key appointments being made locally in schools, colleges, councils, etc. We shouldn't be too churchy and conventional in the subjects we pray for. And - who knows, perhaps from refreshed praying, a calling to act may sometimes follow?

Another cost of change and growth may be, for a church, that the deeper it goes in discipleship the more it finds wounded and difficult people drawn to it.

Jesus, in his earthly ministry, was always surrounded by the wounded and difficult. Becoming more like him may bring the cost of attracting the kind of people he attracted. How ready are we for that?

And, if growth in the Spirit also leads to growth in numbers - that's a joy, but also a challenge. A bigger church can seem less cosy. How can an expanding church retain the quality of community we value so much?

Our Gospel reading let us in on an interaction between Jesus and his early disciples - an interaction in which they clearly felt disturbed at the cost of following him into the unknown. He had to reassure them that the Way they would tread was, in a sense, himself. Courage in following would keep them closer to him than they could imagine. And it would lead to an extraordinary result - they would do the works that he did. That promise itself is challenging. Do we want to be used in that way - to do the works that he did, and greater ones too, with all that that involves?

How ready are we, then, to face the cost and challenges of change and growth?