

A Sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

March 30th 2008

A Healthy Church – energised by faith? (Mark 1)

Today we're embarking as a whole church upon an exercise that will take us 7 or 8 weeks – to Pentecost and beyond. During those weeks we will seek, under God, to discern the 'health' of our church – with a view to praying and planning for the future in ways which will help us to grow.

There will be a series of sermons at the 10 o'clock services on what are called 'the Seven Marks of a Healthy Church' – and those sermons – or notes from the book upon which they are based – will also be available in the Narthex. I want everyone who feels they belong to St Mark's to take part in prayerfully considering the subjects, and responding with their own discernment of St Mark's health in those areas – and that includes members of our other congregations, too, if they would like to take part. So there will be survey sheets available each week which you are invited to fill in at home and then

return. Responses need not be signed, (though you may wish to), and will be collated in time for Trinity Sunday, when we shall start moving forwards together in thinking 'What are we called to do now, in the light of all this?'

But first of all – what are these 'Seven Marks of a Healthy Church'? – and isn't this all (with its surveys and response sheets and so forth) just a management-type of exercise? What has it got to do with finding God's will and doing it?

Here's a little story: in 1996 in Durham Diocese the Adviser in Mission noted from church statistics from 1990 – 1995 an overall decline in church attendance of 16%. Yet she also noted that 25 churches in the diocese had grown by 16% or over in the same period. They'd bucked the trend.

It was decided to call representatives of those 25 churches together, and find out what, if anything, they had in common. And outwardly, it was little – they were of all churchmanships and worship styles, situated in rural, urban and suburban areas. Few of

them majored on being 'growing churches'. Numbers weren't a big issue for them.

And yet they were growing – in a natural, unforced way. And presumably, as in nature, unforced growth is something that is associated with health.

What was the secret? Further discussion unearthed seven basic attitudes that they all shared – and these have become known as 'the seven marks of a healthy church' – and it has also been noted that these seven attitudes all delineate our Lord Jesus Christ's earthly life and ministry pretty accurately. So there must be something right about them!

Here they are – the seven attitudes – the seven 'marks' of health, if you like: Think about how they describe Jesus as I read them:

- 1 – energised by faith
- 2 – with an outward-looking focus
- 3 – seeking to find out what God wants
- 4 – prepared to face the cost (of change and growth)
- 5 – operating as a community (or, in Jesus' case, creating community)
- 6 – making room for all
- 7 – doing a few things and doing them well.

We're being asked to review our life under these headings –to see how far these attitudes permeate our shared life at St Mark's, and inform what we do. And we shall discover this in dialogue with each other – trusting that the Holy Spirit will tell us the truth through each other's insights.

Today we ask ourselves how much our church life is energised by faith. What might that mean? Often it helps to think what the opposite situation would be. And I guess we all know of churches which see themselves as simply struggling to survive, to keep the show on the road, to do what they have always reassuringly done for their members – without a great deal of reference to issues such as coming closer to God, growing and maturing in faith, bringing the Scriptures into lively relationship with everyday life or (perish the thought!) sharing faith with others. I recently heard a vicar of a small village say that the congregation really wanted no change; they don't really want anyone else to join them – except in so far as that would help to pay the parish share. They just want the services to go on being there for them, with no upheaval or questioning of why things should be as they are.

Well, of course, there's a lot to be said for stability! As our Narthex door proclaims, Jesus Christ is 'the same yesterday, today and for ever'. But that's not really an excuse for being stuck in a rut which is reassuring, but doesn't bring anyone closer to God. There isn't a lot of energy in that. Tradition is a wonderful thing – wonderful in its richness. But not wonderful when it's a 'dead hand' on our spiritual lives.

Jesus once said that a scribe in the kingdom of heaven is one who can bring things old and things new out of his store – all with a view to the kingdom. And that's the point - where your focus is. Jesus taught that where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Perhaps we can paraphrase that a bit: where a church's focus is – from there will its energy spring. A church can have energy of the wrong sort – from having its focus on being the 'best' in terms of liturgy, or preaching, or bell-ringing, or choral music, for example. All those things are good – but they shouldn't be the church's *focus*, should they? Or - let's be honest - there's also the kind of energy that comes from competitiveness about numbers. When clergy get together, you know, they can sometimes

get a bit competitive, however subtly they express it. And if you live in a town or city with a lot of outwardly 'successful' churches – well, then, there's scope for quite a lot of competition! But building up numbers isn't necessarily the same thing as being 'healthy' – people can be brought in, and then not fed or helped to be mature Christians. A church can be a bit of an evangelism factory, rather than a community on a journey together.

So – what is a church? Is it a building with some people and a priest, doing liturgical things on a regular basis? Is it a platform for preaching? Or is it, more dynamically, as Archbishop Rowan once put it, 'what happens when the impact of Jesus Christ on a situation brings two or more people together'. Think over those last words carefully...the impact of Christ himself...a situation (by implication, a situation making a difference in the real world) ...people brought together...

On your survey sheet, you'll be asked to think about St Mark's – is its focus on God, and on serving and loving others for his sake? Is that where our energy comes from? Does our worship bring us closer to

experiencing God's love? Do we use Scripture in ways which bring it alive for daily life? And, above all- is this a church where members are encouraged and helped to grow in their faith – and to share it appropriately with others?

Ponder these things. I'm sure there will be encouragement in your responses – but there should be no complacency. May God help us to see St Mark's as he sees it.

Let's finish with a Biblical text, which portrays, I think, what a community is like if it's energised by faith:

Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (Colossians 3.17)