

A sermon by Canon Maggie Guite

Pentecost 2011

Acts 2.1-21

John 20.19-23

### A Church Aiming to Grow

Our first reading, the Pentecost story, was quite a long one – always a challenge, with all those place names from the ancient near-East... And then, after we'd heard that list of all the nations from which bystanders came, who heard the disciples declaring the praises of God in different tongues – then we heard the beginning of a speech which Peter spontaneously gave: our passage stopped at the rousing words which he quoted from the prophet Joel: *'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.'*

But if you were to read on in your Bibles a bit further, you'd find that Peter went on to say much more which was explicitly about Jesus, and what his story means. And when you come to verse 41 of the chapter you'd find these amazing words: *'So those who welcomed his message were baptised ,*

*and that day about three thousand persons were added'*

One of the first effects of the coming of the Holy Spirit was that the Church grew: *'about three thousand people were added.'* This was a sign that the church was fully alive in the Spirit. Living things, after all, grow. We learnt that in primary school, didn't we? Nearly every image of the Church in the New Testament is of a living thing; a body, a flock, a vine, a bride...

Of course, there's also the image of the Church as a building, a temple – and that's not a living thing. But if your garden looks up at the backs of houses in Hardwick Street, as mine does, you'll be very aware that buildings, too, grow (in Hardwick Street's case, usually outwards from the roof-space); and, indeed, when the New Testament compares the Church to a building, it's always one that's under construction, So, the expectation in our foundational documents is that the Church, if it's alive with God's Spirit, is a growing thing. Is that our expectation? About St Mark's?...

Some people say you shouldn't worry about bottoms on seats at Church worship; the Church exists for the Kingdom, and a lot of what God wants to do is outside the Church's walls. Well, that last bit (about God wanting to do things beyond the Church's walls) is certainly true. But who's going to get out there, and intentionally do things God's way, if it's not his people? And how much more might be done in his way, and to his glory in the world, if there were more Christians, resourced, sustained and supported in their service of the Kingdom by belonging to the Church. At its best, the Church is, or should be, a community which constantly refreshes our vision so that we can live, as well as pray, 'your kingdom come', in whatever walk of life we're in.

And then there's the fact that so many people simply *need* God; they really are lonely and lost, however much they try to hide it, and their lives lack a sense of purpose and direction. Many of our neighbours are craving for a love that they just can't find in consumer goods or leisure pursuits, in our celebrity obsessed culture, or our media, which in many quarters are so very unpleasant, and celebrate what's tawdry and mean, selfish and

snide. Wouldn't it be a privilege to share with others the love of Christ – the sense Christians have that life has a meaning, direction and purpose; that there's a strength which can see us through our darkest hours; that there's a depth to life which brings joy, rather than mere happiness, and the peace of being on the path you were made for, rather than mere soothing mood-music? Don't you know people whose lives are a mess – the kind of mess that, in the end, only God can transform? Wouldn't you like those people to become part of this extraordinary movement of Jesus' followers, and discover all that his company can mean for them, as it means for us?

If you know children who are growing up too early, teenagers who don't know what sex is for, adults whose lives are spiritually empty, and old people who are living with despair, then, quite simply, you have a motive for wanting the Church to grow.

And it can happen. Despite the repeated message beloved of the media, that the Church is set for nothing but decline, there's another truth out there. It seems that decline in Church of England parishes overall is bottoming-out, and even turning

a corner; and there are many individual churches which are growing noticeably. Indeed, many of you will remember this church growing noticeably a few years ago; then numbers declined a bit during the interregnum (which often happens); and then numbers began to creep back up again for a while.

But this last year hasn't been so good, as I mentioned in my Report to the Annual Meeting; and that's why it seemed like a bit of providence when a flyer dropped out of a mailing I'd received about something else, advertising a course called '*Leading your Church into Growth*', And that's where I've been for most of the last week, and I've come back both inspired and informed, which is why I'm standing here this morning talking about growing the Church. It's another piece of providence, too, that the course was being held just at the time when we're thinking about renewing our Mission Action Plan, because the confidence to plan for growth should definitely be part of that.

So, let me briefly share a little of what I've been learning – experience shared from other churches of differing traditions in various parts of the country which have been growing. First of all, that the

desire for growth and the expectation of growth – those two things which together make a vision for growth - has to be owned by the whole Church, and not just by the clergy and other leaders. There's a story from the days of the 'space race', after President Kennedy had declared that America would put a man on the moon before the 1960s were out. Of course, a whole lot of money was thrown into the project, but it wouldn't have been achieved if the people at NASA hadn't been fired up by the vision. A US Senator once visited Cape Canaveral at that period, and was being shown round the immense silo of floor upon floor in which the rockets were built. And he came upon a janitor, sweeping the floor. The Senator asked him (though heaven knows why, because it must have been obvious what his job was), 'What do you do here?' And the man replied, without any hesitation: 'I'm here to put a man on the moon'.

That's a picture of vision gripping a whole community; and that's how it needs to be with the Church. We won't all have the same role in the mission, but we need all to share it. We weren't called to be Christians to have a comfortable personal faith as an enhancement to our lives; we

were called to be Christians to share God's mission to the world – as I've been saying in my recent sermons on the 5 marks of mission. Jesus' very first words in founding a community of followers were, '*Follow me, and I will make you fish for people*' - and the community grew from that day on.

And, on the subject of the five marks of mission – just think how they all hold together in the story of the Church growing just after Pentecost. From the telling came the teaching, baptising and nurturing of new believers – and then they began to live in a way which both cared for the weak and challenged social injustice. They held everything in common. When arguments arose within the group as to whether the sharing-out was fair – whether Hebrew speaking widows were getting more than Greek-speakers - the Apostles appointed people (the first deacons) to deal with the issue, and get it right. It's all there in the first 6 chapters of Acts. And if you think there's not much there about the first Christians caring for the integrity of the created world (the fifth of the marks of mission we've been looking at in previous weeks) –just think what impact a Church which seriously lived like the first

Christians did *today* would have in reducing consumption. How would it be if each household didn't have to have its own car, or lawn mower, or whatever other consumer durable you might like to think of – how would it be if we shared a lot more? Wouldn't that do something to reduce our collective carbon footprint? And how would it be if a Christian community, coming to live more and more like that, was a *growing* one?

Now, these are just background thoughts – thoughts about a vision for growth. I learnt a lot more about the kind of strategies for growth which other churches have found to work. And I'm laying myself on the line today, saying I'm going to try and lead by those strategies, and share them with you all, and you may notice some changes quite soon. But there's only time this morning to say two more things: First, no strategy for growth will work without prayer – prayer first, middle and last, offered by all of us. Because we're not thinking about marketing or management here; we're thinking about cooperation with the Holy Spirit in his loving outreach to the world. And secondly, what a wonderful thing it would be if the vision for growth became so much part of *your* thinking – of

the parish's desire and expectation – that when eventually I come to leave (which, as I also said at the APCM, isn't something I'm intending to do very soon) – but when I do, how good it would be if the parish profile drawn up by the PCC to help appoint a new priest said (among all the other good things which it could say about St Mark's) something like this: 'We have a vision for growth, and we review our worship, life and outreach continually in the light of that vision.'

They say it's desire –hunger – in a whole football team that makes it championship material, in conjunction with training and strategy. When *our* desire, along with thinking hard about how we do things, coincides with the fiery, burning desire of God to bring wholeness to the world around us, then extraordinary things may happen.