

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
October 21, 2018 ~ “Twenty-First Sunday of Trinity”

In the sermon last Sunday I was reflecting on the Gospel passage from Mark about the rich man who wanted to have eternal life without having to give up his considerable wealth; it's the passage which ends “With God nothing is impossible”. I was reasonably pleased with what I wrote and thought I might've got a helpful message across. But then at the end of our service, three of our Stepping Up Group performed a short sketch that they had created themselves just that morning on the same passage and which illustrated much more clearly, with far fewer words and with really good examples the same message that I was trying to get across. It was brilliant and it made me realise, as if I didn't know it already, what a talented and gifted bunch of young people we have here at Christ Church. We are so fortunate – and I know that many of you will completely agree.

This week in our Gospel reading we see the disciples behaving badly – we might say squabbling like children but I don't actually think that our children would be as bad! The problem here seems to be that humans find it so hard to break away from thinking in terms of power and hierarchy. As one commentator puts it: “Even though James and John have spent two or three years living and working with Jesus, have gone out on mission preaching the kingdom and experiencing many miracles, being dragged off to meals with rich and poor, socially elite and social outcasts alike, they are still thinking in worldly terms of greatness and status”. They just don't get it that Jesus is trying to teach them to be like servants – ready to serve and not to be served. In a similar vein, Jesus might have asked them: “Why are you following me?” “Why are you here?” And his disciples would have had to stop and think hard about his question. I once worked in a church where a preacher did just that – she asked the congregation “What do you come to church for?” “Why are you here?” It was – it is – a risky question to pose – not least because there is a danger people might then stop

coming as a result of their pondering. But, despite the risks, it is a good question to ask.

Think about that now. There will be many different answers and all of them will probably be good ones. It might be for the music or the coffee served in china mugs or the work with children etc which is why you come. Hopefully all of us might answer that in different ways we are here to meet with God, to encounter God – and there will be a variety of elements that help to make that encounter good, that help to answer the question “what do you come to church for?” Of course people come to church for a whole host of reasons and it is true that some go round churches as if they are supermarket shopping – looking to find the best church. Yet as one theologian has said “wherever you go to worship and however that worship is conducted, it is still church”.

Sometimes of course people will go to a church because of the building. Yet that was not the case in New Testament times; for in those days church, ecclesia, was not a building – it was a gathering of people in a field, by a lake, maybe in someone’s front room. It is as Christianity has grown and developed that the church has become more associated with a building rather than necessarily the people in it. Yet I’m always struck when I read a school OFSTED report that usually speaks more of the staff and pupils than it does of the school buildings – unless of course they are seriously dilapidated. Yet when people speak of a church, they so often tend to mean the bricks and mortar rather than the people in it – the baptised disciples of today who are worshipping and praying and working so faithfully and devotedly.

So how did it all start for you? When was the first time you became conscious of church? For many of us it was through our baptism that God called us to be here. Called us to begin to make a personal relationship with God through other Christians we meet. We were not forced or coerced – God’s invitation to us was and is freely offered and can be accepted or rejected. By baptism we are adopted into the family of God as brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ.

It is why we hold such great store by caring greatly for families who seek baptism – their first step on the Christian journey. I was very touched to receive this message from one baptism family recently, when they wrote: “The christening was brilliant and a great success with a lovely service and the Sunday morning baptism welcome was just terrific. We loved our child being welcomed into the church; it was very special for us and his reaction to being walked around was just fantastic. We really enjoyed being there with you all and everyone was very kind and welcoming to us.”

For first and foremost the church is people. If, God forbid, this church building was destroyed by fire, we would carry on worshipping together somewhere. We use the term church family deliberately – church is where all can come to meet up with each other, to be fed, to feel safe and secure, to feel at home and to be able to be themselves – and yes, at times to disagree in a healthy way.

Yet a church is not like a home. Yes, it is where people come – but it is not where they stay. It is from where people are sent out. A church is not like an ark to protect people from the world around – it is from here that we are sent out to live and work to God’s praise and glory. And that is why we come – to be fed, to be watered, to be nourished, to be loved in order that we can go out and be a Christian in the workplace, in the hospital, at the school gate, in the gym, in our leisure.

For the congregation of this church, the last few years have not been at all easy, not least because of the acute disappointment caused by the collapse of the building project on which so many future hopes for this church were pinned. Yet that is in the past and we have to push towards the future. Remember the words of the hymn, Lord for the years: “past put behind us, for the future take us, Lord of our lives, to live for Christ alone.

Today’s message is that humble obedience comes through persevering when the going gets tough, and which will make us wise enough to listen to what is really important. For the Jesus who we promised at our baptism to follow came not to be served but to serve – so let’s go out and do the same.