

**Evensong Easter 3 Holy Trinity Cuckfield 26.iv.20. Haggai 1.13-2.9 1 Corinthians 3.10-17**

### **Sermon 421 - What Is Church?**

**Abstract: The current pandemic leads us to ask fundamental questions about what church is.**

\* Haggai 1.13-2.9

\* 1 Corinthians 3.10-17.

Forty years ago when I was working in the Bahamas - yes, there really are poor people in the Bahamas as we discovered during the 1919 Hurricane Dorian - I came across a beautiful empty building with a ceremonial plaque proclaiming that it was a centre for people with disabilities. My host and companion, George Soloyanis, explained that this was an example of the "Land and building syndrome": first, he said, you get a piece of land from the Government; and then, because you have a piece of land, you have to get a building and service clubs like the Lions and Rotary always like their name on a plaque on a building; and then you have to think of something to do in the building; and then you have to find staff salaries. The last is the toughest because you can't put a plaque on a salary, so the building stands empty.

Tell that to the people of Judah who re-built the Temple after the Exile. From the Ancient dynasties of China to the Incas of Latin America, quasi theocratic civilisations have been built round particular buildings, but they are nothing to the single-minded focus of the people of Judah on their Temple; and when the Temple was destroyed for a second time, the Judean diaspora had to think again with what effect we can see in the witness of contemporary Judaism. Yes, of course there are Synagogues but the core of Judaism for the last two thousand years has been domestic and studious.

Which leads, naturally, to the question of how have we been doing without our buildings? Personally, my deprivations have been more aesthetic and Sacramental than communal, which tells me something important in that in spite of attending the same church building for 30 years I have not established a sense of community with all my fellow worshippers. Some of them, yes. My house group, yes. But many of them, no. This is by no means unilateral. Looked at closely, it seems to me that there are many people with different politics, different temperaments, different ways of witnessing to Christ and we might not have made enough of an effort to love each other, overcoming our discomfort or even our dislike.

The aesthetic point is simple enough. I enjoy liturgy, particularly if it's choral.

As to the Sacramental deprivation, I find this acute because I was reared in an intensely Roman Catholic Eucharistic culture; it is, if you like, my benign addiction. But the lock-down has forced me to wonder whether this is not the time to combine the Catholic tradition of Eucharistic Consecration with the Protestant tradition of making Christ present in the Eucharist through personal belief. Thus, the power of Priestly consecration could be transmitted by the Holy Spirit to be confirmed by the recipient sitting at her own table with bread and wine. And, anyway, there's no reason it should be bread and wine. Then again, less radically, the priest might consecrate in church what we bring ourselves, keeping our social distance.

This is where we need to think very carefully about what Saint Paul says about ourselves as God's Temples for it seems to me that Paul was the person in Christian history most committed to the idea that believers constitute the body of Christ, an idea somewhat obscured by Medieval Eucharistic doctrine which named the consecrated bread and wine as the body and blood of Christ. We will have to leave a discussion of Henri de Lubac for another day but, in the meantime, we need to enquire what is being asked of us as followers of Jesus who constitute his body.

And here, I think that the lock-down is beginning to teach us some important lessons. First, it seems to me, we understand our communal obligations and are carrying them out cheerfully and persistently but this does not mean that we like some of those we help any more now than we did a month ago. Proximity can put a strain on our relationships by requiring good manners and insincere speech as well as love. It seems to me that love when required might be better than pointless civilities.

Secondly, we are being sustained by millions of people who have never set foot in a church, who are risking their lives frequently both because they are principled and brave but often, too, because they are too poor to stop working. Are these people also members of the Body of Christ and if they are, then it's our duty, not a matter of preference, to tell them. They are displaying a kind of love in service, risking their lives, which many of us would be too cowardly to do. Can they tell us anything about love? What they tell me is that they are practising love when they see its necessity rather than indulging in a pretence of universal love which is no more than civility.

Thirdly, my conclusion from these two ideas is that instead of trying to love everybody in a rather shallow, language-based way, we should be prepared to love those who most need it, here or somewhere else, without hesitation or equivocation. There are enough people within easy reach and enough causes within our digital reach which demand our attention and action.

In short, the lock-down has made me re-think the idea of love and community in a rather fundamental way. I can see why some of us like to meet regularly in buildings to worship together but I am sceptical of the idea that a congregation is a love unit; I think to think so is to ask too much. But we have to remember that Christianity started with the domestic unit and that might be where love flourishes best, particularly when sacrifice is required, and we shall hardly get through a life of loving without sacrifice.

None of these suggested ways of thinking are anything but suggestions, starting points for thought, and it is certain that there will be other and better thoughts from other people and places; but I cannot help thinking that there is no going back, that affluence has made us over-complicate everything because we have been able to afford it, that injustice has been masked, more or less, by economic growth and credit, and that civility has been a pretty good substitute for sacrifice.

What do you think?

