

CW Proper 12 (7th after Trinity) Evensong Holy Trinity Cuckfield 26.vii.20 I Kings 6.11-14,23-38 Acts 12.1-17 - Kevin Carey

Sermon 431 - Joy

Abstract: The post pandemic situation poses some massive problems which we must face with courage and joy.

* I Kings 6.11-14, 23-38.

As is often the case with the Readings, I could find absolutely nothing that connected them so I had to choose between one of my favourite pieces, the one about the goofy maid who doesn't immediately let the escaped Peter into John Mark's house or a rather forbidding piece about Solomon's Temple. You will be sorry to hear I chose the solemn bit, mainly because we are all very soon going to have to think seriously about religious buildings.

Let me start with Hurstpierpoint. It has four salons where ladies' hair is cut and dressed but I know a lady who drives all the way to Haywards Heath, past goodness knows how many similar establishments in Burgess Hill, to have her hair cut and dressed, my point being that we are living in the age of the motor car where people will exercise consumer choice; and it is this reality which we will finally have to face as an institutional church.

I know the warm theory of the Church of England being in every community and existing for everybody but that does not mean that there has to be a physical building in every community which usually lies empty for six and a half days per week, consumes too much energy, costs too much to maintain, and is part of the heritage industry not paid for by the heritage industry. We all might keep telling ourselves that "we are church" which means that we can be Church in our community without a physical building; but the question hanging in the air is whether we are largely church as culture and not church as mission.

At a rough estimate, the capital cost of Holy Trinity Church over the past 30 years has been #1.2 million, or #40 thousand Pounds per year. In addition, we raise an annual income of approximately #120 Thousand, more than half of which goes as our Contribution, to what?

You might well ask! A good deal of what our Contribution pays for are the officials at Church House; so let me tell you about some of them. There is a function that exists to promote mission, to make us more open to those who find the institutional Church difficult; and there is a heritage function which exists to ensure that we maintain our historic fabric. Holy Trinity Hurstpierpoint wants to institute the wildly radical step, in the name of mission, of replacing its 19th Century, mass produced, ugly pews, with - chairs. And guess what! Two functions which we financially support in Church House are at war with one another and in addition to paying for them we have to pay for a lawyer out of our remaining funds to secure the mission objective of chairs! This is not dissimilar to us selling arms to a warring power and then spending our aid budget reconstructing what our bombs have knocked down. But whatever the extent of such oddities, the salient fact is that we

have too many expensive bishops and Church Houses, too many rules, too much guidance and not enough trust. The issue on this occasion is not whether we should be disestablished but whether we should break away from a legislative model based on secular parliaments and opt instead for agreement on broad principles with discretion first to bishops and then to priests and people. I remember that when I was on General Synod we passed a relatively simple Law to allow people to marry in a church with which they had what was termed a "qualifying connection", well and good; but then the House of Bishops issued 40 pages of guidance on the implementation.

Given this buildings crisis and the ubiquity of the motor car, would it not be better to have fewer buildings and pay for taxis for those who cannot or do not want to drive to church? And should we not disown our heritage obligation when it clashes with our missionary purpose?

Not that I think there is a straight split between Zoom and our own reduced stock of buildings. For a start, there really is no reason why denominations should not share buildings but more important is the potential of house groups and services in private houses; that, after all, is where we started.

There are all kinds of ways of giving glory to God and, for a variety of reasons, the way in Western Europe has been to do this in a way that can be recorded is through buildings, more than music and art, less than literature. But what cannot be recorded is the way that we have prayed; never enough, of course, but hardly ever intensely outside war and pestilence. There is nothing wrong with intercessory prayer but we have tended to confine it to the dramatic and the domestic. As a former Member of the General Synod I am aware that we were frequently asked to pray for the development or implementation of this or that policy; but if ever there was a time to pray for a new strategy to meet our new ways of carrying out Christ's mission, it is now.

King Solomon had it easy: he had a direct line to God; he was an autocrat who could do what he wanted, subject to God; and his nation, from the inception in the wilderness of the Ark of the Covenant had an unbroken ambition to find a permanent place of worship to and a residence for YHWH. Would that it was so simple for us but, as it isn't, we have to play the hand we have been dealt as best we can.

Underlying these concerns, there is yet another factor which is totally independent of the pandemic and economics and that is our demographic. Of all the issues facing us, surely the most acute is transforming ourselves from a shrinking, conforming church to a vibrant, affirming church. There is no strategy that is going to reverse our numeric nor our financial decline; there is no revivalist model that will breathe vigour into an ailing body; we must pray for more courage, more intensity, more adventure, more freedom, much more tolerance of difference, our supposed strength and, above all, unlimited joy.