

Testimony of John – Vocation – Building community

From this morning's epistle:

“Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.”

Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians is one of my favourite books in the Bible. It is one of my favourites because it is widely regarded as the oldest Christian scripture. What is important to me is this. It does not try to argue that Christ rose from the dead. Rather it accepts Christ's rising as the pivotal fact, acknowledged by author and readers. And from that fact of the resurrection, it tries to tackle some of the issues faced by the community. This is something we are still trying to do today.

And it is sometimes rather hard to do this. After a year like 2020, it is hard to see how we can always rejoice, how we can give thanks in all circumstances.

This year has been and continues to be challenging. Many have been isolated. Many have lost their jobs. Many have been ill. Many have died. For much of it we were denied the sacraments. It has been impossible for us to come together as a community in many of the ways we used to. And we face challenges ahead. We will try to rebuild our economy amid the challenges of Brexit and Scottish separatism, and with the education of our young people and new workers having to play catch up after the pandemic.

St Paul also says “test everything”. If our faith says that we are to give thanks in all circumstances, then we might feel that we should test our faith.

Testing our faith is one way that our faith grows. The seeking of God in the most difficult times, or to put it another way, wondering where he is and what he is doing, is for many a profound step in their journey of faith. But if we are to test our faith, we must first understand it. And the best way to understand our faith is to live it.

Our advent book this year is: “The liturgy of the ordinary” by Tish Harrison Warren. The author discusses a number of normal daily activities, and finds in them signs of our faith. I was asked to preach on Chapter 9 – Calling a Friend. In this chapter Tish Harrison Warren describes the importance of community, and in particular the community of the church. She points out that Christ did not come to redeem people, but to redeem a people. Our redemption is not simply the transformation of individuals; it is the transformation of a community. In that transformation, we, the Church, become the Body of Christ.

The third Sunday of Advent traditionally focusses on John the Baptist. John pointed to Christ. But he was careful to make clear that he himself was not Christ. Like John, we have been called by God. Like John, we have been given a mission. Like John, we are to point to Christ not ourselves. BUT we are not just to tell the good news, we are together to embody it. We are together to show a community that is a sign of the good news, that is a sacramental presence in the wider population.

We are together to show a community which, as Isaiah wrote, brings good news to the oppressed, binds up the broken-hearted, and proclaims liberty to the captives, whether physically in prison, or trapped by poverty, addiction, or the misplaced values of our consumerist culture. Part of that is actually being a community, not just a group of individuals - being a community in its finest sense, caring for those most in need, showing and sharing love. One thing we might do, in these challenging times, is to keep in touch with those kept away by the pandemic. We can all, in the words of our Advent book, call a friend.

I say this as somebody who is not good at social phone calls. With feeling, I remind myself that the parts we play in building God's kingdom are specific to each of us. And so, avoiding an appalling pun, I would like to move from phone calls to God's call.

It is traditional on this third Sunday of Advent to preach about vocation. The vicar has suggested that I might talk about my own journey. For fear of being a bore, I will limit myself to two stories. The first is that my calling to ministry came through another church member. In my case, I was indulging in that part of the liturgy that does not feature in the service books, namely having a moan to the vicar after the service. And the vicar just blurted out that he thought I was called to ordained ministry. It was completely unexpected. Indeed, I thought, and still think, that clergy are generally much nicer people than I am. I did not feel up to the task.

I have since found that this is true of all callings. Not only that most are highlighted by somebody else, but also that none of us can manage on our own strengths. That is why we need the Holy Spirit. That is why we need to embed our ministries, whatever they may be, in prayer.

And that leads to my second story. The church puts candidates for ordained ministry through a long process of discernment, involving interviews, assignments, and a rather scary weekend where every step seems to be watched. I am guessing that the people doing this discernment pray a lot. But, even though they told me that they felt my calling was genuine, I was still unsure. So, I prayed a lot too. And, in my greatest moment of confusion, I went to a church dedicated to St Peter, lit a candle, and asked him to intercede, that I might get some guidance. The moment I said "Amen", a woman came up to me and said, "Excuse me, can I talk with you about my cancer?"

Now this may just be a coincidence. But my experience is that the more I pray, the more these coincidences seem to happen. What I felt I was being told, is that I would find joy in ministering with those on the borderland, on the fringes of this life and this society: the very ill, the very isolated, and the very poor. And so it has proven.

I am pretty sure that this is true for all of us. The part each of us is to play in the Body of Christ is where, perhaps unexpectedly, we will find joy. It may be in reaching out to those in need, it may be in teaching the faith to adults or children, it may be in enriching our worship. It is all part of being a community that embodies the good news. And for most of us, that calling is to build this community here in the parish of St Michael's, where, right now, there is a lot of need, as we face Christmas in a pandemic.

So I hope each of you, perhaps with the vicar's help, will find your calling. I hope the Holy Spirit will empower you to answer that call. I hope in it you will find joy. And in the meantime, please remember, yourselves, to call our locked down friends. Amen.