SERMON: SUNDAY BEFORE LENT

*LENT SERMON SERIES 2020*

1. “THE CHURCH’S OPPORTUNITY”

*The Rev’d Dr. Richard Fermer*

*Sunday, 23rd February*

*Readings: Exodus 24.12 – 18, Matthew 17.1 – 9*

*“A Vision for Church Renewal”, Samuel Wells*

*Since the 1980s, in the West, social progress has lagged behind economic progress. Living standards have improved but solidarity and empowerment have been neglected. Economists who have assumed growth was everything, missed the fact that care, belonging, trust, identity and agency have been diminishing. The result is an increasing sense of powerlessness and isolation. The social role of the church lies precisely in these areas so badly neglected by economic policies for the last forty years. A gospel that advocates a personal faith, assures a welcome in a heaven to come and emphasizes individual discipleship colludes with a socio-economic dismantling of community and belonging. A gospel that longs for heaven to come to earth, that is built on mutual solidarity, that discovers gifts in the stranger, and seeks to be a blessing to a whole society, is offering the world what it most desperately needs.*

(*Extract from “A Future that’s Bigger than the Past”*)

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Imagine a spiritual landscape through which an axis runs, from the Birth of Christ, the light entering the darkness, making visible the glory of God; continuing on through the Baptism of Jesus, where the words heard again at the Transfiguration are first spoken: “This is my beloved Son in whom my favour rests.” Then, imagine that same axis going further, pre-figuring the glory of the Resurrection, on the Mount of Christ’s Transfiguration, only to lead to the journey to Jerusalem and the Cross, where light appears at first extinguished, only for it to return in greater abundance at the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus, where He is exalted, in order that we may be lifted up. These are all moments, like that of the appearance of God to Moses on Mount Sinai, of “theophany”, the showing forth of God’s glory, His presence with us and how life can be in the new creation. They are glimpses of those words that Jesus speaks in John’s Gospel, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10.10), this Jesus, “the glory of God, a human being fully alive” (St Irenaeus of Lyon).

As Jesus and the disciples make their way down from the mount to begin their way to Jerusalem, we are invited to journey with them, in a way which challenges and deepens our faith. This year we ask Jesus to be our Guide and the Spirit our force, to help us reimagine the renewal of our church, and therefore our own personal renewal, “for such a time as this”. This is what the Rector of St Martin-on-the-Fields, Sam Wells, seeks to do in his new book, “A Future that is bigger than the Past”, because the Kingdom is something God brings, rather than what we achieve, and is about abundance, not rise and decline like the empires of old.

One of the starting points is an affirmation of the axis of the Transfiguration: we begin with a vision of the glory or abundance of God and His gift to us. Christianity, Wells proposes, is not fundamentally about escaping sin, death, and hell, as some distortions of the Gospel have held, but about sharing God’s gift in Christ of abundant life. The renewal of the Church needs to be founded in communities that delight in God, as Peter on the Mount who affirms “Lord, it is good for us to be here” (17.4). It needs to be rooted in the celebration of the abundance of God’s creation, the creativity of human culture that flows from it, and the flourishing of life. “Christianity caught on in the second and third centuries”, Wells observes, “because it created institutions that gave people possibilities and opportunities the rest of world had yet to imagine.” He calls on the Church to model and make possible social relationships not found elsewhere, because they are grounded in the values of God’s Kingdom. Although, the Church faces all the challenges of operating in a Post-Christendom, largely secular society, and in the context of the failure of the success of liberalism and the tensions of globalisation, this can be an opportunity, not just a crisis. As Wells makes clear in the extract above, if the church can step into the breach and model an alternative society in which care, community, belonging, trust, identity and empowerment are at its heart, under God’s grace we can imagine a future that’s bigger than the past.

One of the things Wells is most critical of is the way in which our church buildings have become “set-apart places of retreat to facilitate”, in his words, “the once-weekly elevation of the souls of the few to the throne of heaven”. Such a vision, in a largely secular society, cannot but be insular and destined to terminal decline. He wants a broader vision, where worship and discipleship are at the core of churches which are “places of encounter” for the wider community, “with a mission to be a blessing to anyone and everyone who resides or spends time there.” He writes: “What I’m describing is transforming church buildings – underused, seen as moribund, and a drain on resources– into dynamic centres of abundant life, receiving, evidencing, dwelling in and sharing forms of social flourishing and being a blessing to their neighbourhood.”

Where do I feel the Chapel sits in all of this? I think we are caught somewhere between. In the last seven years, much has been done to reach out to the local community. We have put on an amazing range of community-building events. We have conducted outreach to people with dementia, and started a weekly lunch club for refugees and homeless people. Our rooms are used throughout the week by a range of groups. People who get to know us on a Sunday as a community, comment on the post-Service camaraderie. Our worship speaks of the beauty of holiness and our preaching and courses challenge us to deepen our faith.

But if one looks a little more forensically, there are the pressures of the busyness of modern living and the scarcity of time, which eats into regularity of attendance. We are also a gathered church – 72%+ of us travel in from other parts of London and are unlikely to do this more than once a week on a regular basis. Volunteers are scarce in the week. For example, the Thursday International Lunch Club would be unviable were it not for the volunteers, who draw alongside us from Forsters law firm. The same is true for “Hymns & Pimms” our outreach work to those living with dementia and their carers. It is bolstered by a loyal following of volunteers from our local community who are not members of the Chapel congregation. This may show success in making connections with the wider community. Wells speaks of the introversion of “once-weekly elevation of the souls of the few to the throne of heaven”, which may have shaken you? Surely worship and prayer are at the core of church? Indeed they are central, but without an active discipleship sent out from prayer and the Eucharist, how will the Gospel ever be proclaimed beyond these four walls?

Read any book on growth. Most church growth happens not through the professional efforts of evangelism by the pastor, but by a congregation mobilised to reach out to family and friends, to pull them in. This does happen here, but we surely need to do more of it and more of it collectively. In short, we need more intentional and active in our engagement. We need to know what we are about and we need to come together in commitment to a common purpose. Wells writes: “People disregard or dismiss Christianity less often because they conclude that Darwin disproved the Bible than because they have little or no exposure to how the church is a life-changing or an existential blessing to people in crisis, trouble or distress. (…) The church must model what the kingdom of God means and entails in visible and tangible form.” Our community is that visible and tangible sign to the world – let’s own that!

If we return to the axis of the Transfiguration, we can step beyond any downward spiralling self-deprecation, by being renewed by the Good News that we are beloved sons and daughters of God, in and through whom God’s light is to shine. The secret of renewal is in essence simple: first, delight in God; then, delight in the light that has been given to you and others; and, finally give and receive that light in an exchange with others. We do not have to become something that we are not. We just have to be our true and glad selves. We do not have to be constrained by the scarcity or not of our resources, or the prevalent secular culture of our times. God is abundant. We need to find the gifts of God in each other more deeply and let them shine as we work *together* to follow Christ and His Spirit in bringing heaven to earth, by showing solidarity with others, by discovering gifts in the stranger, and seeking to be a blessing to the society around us. Each one of us has something to contribute to that “dance of delighting” that our community needs to be, as we celebrate the flourishing of life that is the gift of our Lord Jesus.

In this Lent Series of Sermons, we engage our imaginations and hearts in conceiving how this may be possible, and in the process, we are invited to renew and nurture our own personal faith and deepen our life together. In our discussion over lunch, I will go on to say a little more about the course that Wells steers, in the choppy waters of our times, as he analyses it, towards a vision of a “reimagined” Church.