

EASTER 7 ALL SAINTS 2017

I had many people say to me how much they loved Easter Sunday this year. They enjoyed the responses of the congregation.

They thought the singing was uplifting, the preaching inspiring and the liturgy well executed. And when we have Easter I always wonder about the many newcomers or visitors that we have. What is their experience? Do they find the worship inspiring, but more importantly do they feel welcomed? Do they feel comfortable to come back again?

I know that here at All Saints we pride ourselves on being a friendly and welcoming community. We often talk about being a family. For the most part we are.

Sometimes things don't go the way we might expect. Sometimes people leave because they feel uncomfortable. Perhaps they weren't welcomed well. A friendly welcoming family is what so many churches claim to be. There is

nothing wrong with this description but I think we may need to go further in trying to understand what it means to be the church. Family is not a bad model. It just doesn't apply to everyone. It really doesn't go far enough. What we understand the church to be may help us to express what we believe about its nature.

2

Jesus in the gospel tells us something important about the church. You can be forgiven if you didn't pick up what it is. It's a somewhat convoluted passage and needs some teasing out. Jesus is praying to the Father for his disciples and the community he is leaving behind. He offers four petitions to God.

One petition asks that the Christian community might exhibit the same oneness that exists between Jesus and his Father. Another petition is that God will sanctify the community. That is to set it apart and make it Holy for the purpose of God. The third petition is that the community will be protected as it lives its life in the world. And the

final petition of Jesus is that what he has begun will be continued by the community.

3

These four petitions of Jesus are very important in understanding something of the nature of the church. When we use the Nicene Creed we say the same petitions ourselves. We say we believe in the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church”. These are called the four marks of the church.

Unfortunately we have a tendency to rattle them off without taking much notice of them. It is helpful to make them distinct when we say them because they tell us who we are. Yes who WE are. The church is not just an organisation, nor is it the clergy or the bishops. The church is each one of us. We are the church wherever we

are and are required to act out these four marks. Jesus prayed that we would be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. So how are we to do that?

4

When we talk about the church being one we often think in terms of unifying the different branches of Christianity. However the unity of the church lies in Christ rather than any way in which the church is organised. If we were to examine the church before the break of the reformation we would discover that there was no sense of uniformity about it at all. Countries differed enormously about how the church was organised and what happened in their worship. In England there were five different prayer books in use. We tend to think of unity in terms of uniformity. Uniformity is not what is required.

Think for instance of the Commonwealth of nations. All nations in the commonwealth are different yet we are united by our allegiance to the Queen. The same is true of the church. We are all different but we are united by our allegiance to the risen Christ as expressed in our common baptism. Uniformity is not required.

5

The church is also holy. This means that the church is set apart for God and owes its existence to God's will. It is not about being better than anyone else. It is about striving to live as God asks us to live. Failing often but always striving. The church is set apart from the world in order that it might be closer to the world. That closeness to the world is expressed in the next mark of the church which is Catholic.

Catholic simply means Universal. In regard to the church it is saying this community is for all people at all times and in all places. The church is all inclusive and will embrace

any who wish to belong. And of course if we are to be universal we have the task of proclaiming the Good News of God in Christ to all people. Here lies our Apostolic nature.

6

To be an apostle is to be one who is sent. We are sent to proclaim the essential tradition of the apostles teaching and preaching. It is necessary to safeguard that tradition through the church's Bishops Priests and Deacons. So the church is linked to the apostles through its teaching enshrined in the creeds, in its order, and in its mission.

I said earlier that the church is each one of us; it is you and me wherever we are. So we all have the task of being one, holy, catholic and apostolic in the way each one of us lives. We are to be one in our attitude to each other because of

our common baptism. That does not mean uniformity, but it does mean a real recognition of difference. It is an acceptance of one another as being part of the body of Christ.

7

We are to be holy in that we are aware of being set apart for God. Holy in that we seek to maintain our relationship with God through worship and our own devotional life. When we have a strong relationship with God not only will we be holy, we will also be able to be Catholic.

Our catholicity enables us to accept others because of the universal nature of our faith. The Good News is for all

people we meet. We are to be the ones carrying that good news by our actions as much as by our words. And carrying that good news we will find we are sent by God into places we may never have expected.

8

This being sent is the expression of our apostolic nature. By trying to live in Christ so we carry out our mission to the world. Teresa of Avila is credited with saying, "Christ has no body now but yours, no feet but yours, no hands but yours." The church, you and I are the visible symbol of Christ in the world. We are Christ's body, hands and feet. We are the visible witness to Christ's ongoing presence and action in the world.

So our presence at worship week by week is to help us hear again our need to be the church which is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. When we receive the body of Christ we are reminded we are to be that which we receive. We are to be the body of Christ. This is what brings life to the world.