

Letter from the Vicar - May 2009

Faith in the Church?

The celebration of Pentecost on the last day of May and the end of my first six months here have led me to think about what it means for us to be Church here in the villages of the Five Alive Mission Community and more generally to think about what any of us think we are doing when we say we are the Church. Whilst trying to avoid steering into perilous philosophical waters about the nature of Church, I have been thinking about the way that Jesus talked about being his people (Jesus never talked about the Church specifically, though he did talk of a time when his followers would no longer be a part of the Jewish religious institution). I also considered the writings of St Paul, who we could consider the architect of the Church as we know it, or at least the one who gave the people of Christ structure and shape in their organisation. Likewise I have been thinking and looking again at the record of the early Church in the New Testament. This, and listening to a challenging talk by the Revd John Bell of the Iona Community, brought up some questions:

Are we, as Jesus commanded, one Church, united in all things? No!
Are we, as St Paul described, one body so intimately bound together that 'when one suffers, all suffer, when one rejoices, all share that rejoicing'? No!
Are we, as the Acts of the Apostles describes, living with everything in common, any surplus goods sold and the money given to the poor? No!

So what are we? Has the Church failed?

Well, we could say yes, that all churches fail to be exactly what the Gospel and our Holy Scriptures describe the Church to be. Or should be. But essentially we are God's redeemed people, and we exist only through God's grace, love and forgiveness. We start from the very point of realising we can never be ideal, that we are broken and sinful people and that it is only through Christ we are able to be a part of God's body here on earth, the Church. In a world which constantly demands our leaders, our politicians, our bankers and others say sorry – many of whom refuse – we are a body who recognise our need to say sorry, to God and to one another, and to accept God's forgiveness and begin again.

To those who criticise our Churches we must admit that we are not perfect, that we make mistakes, that part of being a Christian is to admit our inadequacy and yet to allow God to lift us up and make us new. That in the midst of our brokenness there is hope given through Christ to build us up again and make us into the people God wants us to be. This means that the hallmarks of our Church should be tolerance, forgiveness, humility, love, graciousness, mutual comfort, acceptance and welcome – for these are all things that God gives us despite our unworthiness. Though I am more than willing to receive criticism of the Church and even of myself and my mistakes, I would hope that within our Church fellowships we do this with a desire to grow in faith, hope and love, and to be together the people of God. Thanks be to God for a Church that isn't perfect, but let us be inspired by our calling to be holy, grace filled Christians and Churches so that others in our broken, imperfect and often painful world may find a home and a place to belong.