

Parish Festival 2007 -- Better Together!

First I want to emphasize how good it is for the parish to worship together on this occasion and I want to welcome all those of you who usually worship at St. Barnabas to St. Mary's this morning – I hope you have felt welcome and that you will feel that you are very much part of us as we believe we are of you. I want to welcome back in a way those of you who left St. Mary's just over a year ago and helped the church of St. Barnabas to get going. And I want to congratulate all of you at St. Barnabas for the excellent way you have risen to the challenge of planting a new church. I do hope you have felt encouraged and supported by all the parish of Thatcham, which in a way leads into the theme of my sermon this morning. I am going to use the New Testament reading we had this morning as the basis for my sermon – twice in that short passage the writer of the letter to the Ephesians uses the word “together” and at the end of that passage the Ephesians are told – and I believe this is as relevant to us now as it was to them some two thousand years ago – that “you are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit “.

“You are being built together”. Some thirty years ago now a young bishop who just happened to have played cricket for England and was destined to reach the top at anything he did, was made Bishop of Liverpool – very soon after another young bishop, this time a Roman Catholic, was made Archbishop of Liverpool. So started a remarkable friendship and partnership between David Sheppard and Derek Worlock. With that wonderful scouse humour, the Liverpoolians called them Fish and Chips because, on account of all the controversy they caused, they were hardly out of the paper! The Liverpool they arrived at was torn apart by huge divisions – an unhappy, demoralised and disheartening place – and a great deal of that was down to the real hatred that had grown over many decades between Catholic and Protestant. Sheppard and Worlock made it their mission in that city to transform that state of affairs – and today if you go there you can see the miracle that they performed over some twenty years. It took both men a great deal of hardship and personal sacrifice – and the thing that they said made it possible was that very early on in their mission they decided that it must be done together. And later when they wrote a book about how that miracle had been achieved they entitled it “better together”.

I tell you that story because there is a sense that the church in Liverpool in the 20th century had much in common with the church that had developed in Ephesus. There were divisions and factions and people were beginning to take sides and the whole structure of the church was beginning to fall apart. The writer of the letter to the Ephesians (which might or might not have been Paul) exhorts the Christian people to realise what it means to be member of Christ's church. It is he says both a huge privilege and a great challenge. And we would do well to listen ourselves to what he has to say.

Firstly he says that we are no longer strangers and aliens – that we are citizens of God's kingdom and that we are full members of the family of God. Put simply that means that through Jesus, we all have a home with God. Through Jesus there is a seat and a place for every one of us, and for all people, in the family of God. We have often erected barriers to keep people out. It is a tragedy for the Church that it has so often been more exclusive than God – and it continues sadly to be so today. Such exclusivity is something we must work hard to avoid.

Secondly the writer paints a picture of a building. He sees every church as part of a great building and of every Christian as a stone built into that church. And of the whole Church the corner stone is Jesus Christ - if you take that corner stone away the whole building collapses – it is the corner stone that holds everything together. But with Christ as the cornerstone the stones become one – they are joined together and are built into a holy temple. Now the temple was of course the place where it was thought God dwelt. So the writer deliberately uses that word temple because as the stones of the Christian church are built together so they too will become the dwelling place of the spirit of God.

What I find interesting about this passage is the emphasis on the “togetherness” of the people of God – the stones are joined together to become the holy temple – they are built together to become a dwelling in which God’s spirit resides. And although there are other parts of our Christian teaching that inform us that God’s spirit lives in each one of us – when we come to act out our individual calling to be disciples of Christ we find that we cannot do it alone – we have to do it together – because it is always better together.

Our vision for this parish has always been that although on a Sunday morning there may be two separate acts of worship going on, they are simply two expressions of the one church. We will of course have our preferences and our allegiances to one or the other worshipping community but I pray that we might feel as though we belong to each other – that we can support and pray for each other – and that we can fulfil our mission and ministry as one body. Such a closeness of relationship will provide a stimulus and resources for a renewed joint act of witness to the people of Thatcham – and we pray that this will be eventually some thing that we can carry on to the next inevitable stage – which will include our neighbours in the other local churches.

Today I want us to make this a celebration of our togetherness and renew our commitment to each other so that dedicating our lives to Christ and having him for our cornerstone we might find ourselves being built into a holy temple and be a dwelling place for the spirit of God. It is not something we can do alone – it is always better together. And it is then that miracles happen.