

The Seven Marks of a Healthy Church

Mark 1: Being Energised By Faith

Today we start our summer series of sermons on *The Seven Marks of A Healthy Church* and it falls to me to address the first of these marks: a healthy church is a church that is *energized by faith*. So often we use whatever energies we've got to address the question: How do we keep on going? Money is short, what do we do? "We are drawing upon our historic reserves just to keep up with the house-keeping. How are we to survive?" Oh yes, everyone. Come to any PCC meeting, if you doubt that. And the sad thing is that we all think we are being *realistic* when we talk that way, as though faith has nothing to do with it.

But how can we *energise* ourselves with faith? Well, lesson number one is getting a correct understanding of what *faith* itself is. Faith is a misunderstood and much maligned thing these days. Atheists, especially the ones that don't know anything about faith, are fond of telling us that faith is an unthinking, mediaeval, superstitious tendency to believe in the existence of things in the total absence of evidence. It's a life-style choice that has been outmoded by science, they think it should be *exterminated*. Take a look at any of today's fashionable media atheists, ladies and gentlemen. They go around like Dr. Who's Daleks: 'Exterminate, exterminate, resistance is futile'.

Well! If that is what faith is, I would agree with them. But they are *wrong*. In the first place, I am not a Christian, even the poor one that I am, on the basis of a total lack of evidence. That would be *blind* faith and blind faith is about as useful as a chocolate fireguard. Have nothing to do with blind faith, ladies and gentlemen.

No! I am a Christian because I *do* have evidence for its truth – *powerful* evidence – Christ Jesus himself. That is why we say ‘Alleluia’ ladies and gentlemen.

Alleluia. I heard the voice of Christ in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’ and that was it: I became a Christian. And I don’t think that I am being irrational.

That’s in the *first* place. In the *second* place, faith is better understood as *trust*. We use the word this way when we talk about having faith in one another. We have faith or trust *in* someone – to do a job, say, or as a life-partner, or in a church role. This is important, ladies and gentlemen. If I have faith in you, I don’t mean I believe in your existence without having a scrap of evidence that you’re really there. That would be crazy. Rather, I already *know* you exist and now I have *trust* in you. Christian faith is like that. We *encounter* Christ in our lives. We already *know* he exists. I know *Christ* exists just as well as I know *you* exist. We then *trust* him – or not. If we do, *that’s* faith, ladies and gentlemen *that’s* faith. Faith is simply perceiving Jesus as the Christ. Faith is the perception of the world as God’s creation. Faith is perception that has *fallen in love* with Christ. Faith is not blind, stupid, evidence-less, empty choice, it is the most visionary power we can have.

Now I must make a confession. I’ve only been a Christian for nine years – and my faith can *weaken*. My faith can so easily become a poor old thing – just like the rest of me, especially when it is on its *own*. That’s why we *need* each other. That is why we sing, “Bind us together, Lord, bind us together, with chords that cannot be broken”. In other words, it is why we need Christ’s body - the *church*. It is why we need the *Word*, ladies and gentlemen; it is why we need the *sacraments*.

So that is the *third* place, everyone – faith involves *community*. Private devotion is a good thing but faith can never be entirely reduced to it. Faith is *bodily*. Faith is not something I have for *myself*. It is not something you have for *yourself*. Faith is something *we* have for *ourselves*. Faith is indeed *personal* but purely private faith is fool's gold.

So, where, then, does that leave our issue? What does it mean for our church to be *energised* by faith? Well, first off, we need each other. Without that, we are climbing Mount Impossible, ladies and gentlemen. Secondly, it means that we must become *Christian realists*. It means we trust Christ and *not* money. It means we trust God, *not* our own mere survival. If we trust mere survival, ladies and gentlemen, then mere survival is just what we are likely to earn for ourselves.

And just what is mere survival? Let me describe it. Mere survival is a characteristic of plankton. Mere survival means a future of being tossed around by the waves. And that means that mere survival is a negation of our God-given freedom, for we become subject to the pitiless, purposeless, meaningless forces of our evolution – and nothing else. Am I selling it to you, ladies and gentlemen? Let me tell you this: if mere survival is what we want – count me out.

So let us not deceive ourselves into thinking we are being realistic by focusing on the wrong goals, ladies and gentlemen, for we will become purveyors of failure. We will become like the rich fools of today's gospel. Remember: "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God".

Let us not, in other words become *Secular Realists*, ladies and gentlemen. That is just the failure-monger at work in us all. Instead let us become *Christian Realists*. And let us begin being *that* by trusting the power of prayer, for if we think that the Lord ignores our prayer, just because we don't always get what we want, then we do indeed, fail in our trust. And let us also pray for *discernment* – for a clear vision of what we can do together. Let us pray that the light of Christ constantly shines on the darkness of our church *organization*. Finally, let us pray that Christ *uses* us. Then we will indeed, be rich towards God. Then indeed shall we be a church *energised* by faith.

Amen