

## Be Optimistic - Revd Dr John Spring Sunday 17<sup>th</sup> January 2010

**Readings: Isaiah 62. 1-5, Psalm 36. 5-10, 1Corinthians 12. 1-11, John2. 1-11**

*In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

*Given the horror, for the people of Haiti, of the earthquake and its aftermath, it may seem wrong for us to be thinking, this morning, about our own problems, concerns and challenges – as a church and as individuals. However, I don't believe that is the case. I began to write this sermon before the earthquake struck, and I remain convinced that God wants me to preach his word to you to address the situation that has arisen for us with our Vicar's announcement of her intention to step down. Even so, our hearts go out to the people of Haiti, and we unite ourselves especially with those people who have, in the midst of the ruin and carnage, processed and prayed and sung the praises of God along the streets of death, to give the people heart in the midst of their suffering.*

### **BE OPTIMISTIC**

The bible and the history of the Church both tell us that, in the life of the people of God, there are always periods of great prosperity and periods of deep adversity. There are times of ascent and times of decline; there are times of staleness and flatness, and times of freshness and fizz; there are times when things tail off and run down, and times when the life of the faith community regenerates and flourishes.

Of course, most of us like to live in times when the Church is doing well, and many of us are old enough to remember the days when that was so for the Church of England. We remember how the Sunday Schools and youth groups were bulging, the Confirmation classes so large we exhausted the bishops to confirm so many candidates. But we do not get to choose, and the time when the C of E was strong and prosperous has passed. Now we find ourselves in a day when the Church in Western countries, and the Anglican Church especially, is increasingly hard-pressed.

Here in Sorrento and Rye, as for many of the parishes on the peninsula, in this time of general difficulty for the Anglican Church, we – a parish made up of Anglicans, Unitings, Baptists, Roman Catholics and whatever – have now been called on to meet the challenge of finding a new vicar. And not just any vicar, but the vicar we and God can agree, and whom we will find, is the right kind of person, with the right gifts, beliefs, background and ministry priorities, to lead this community and help us to shape its mission into the future.

Of course, it is natural for parish communities to have a bout of nervous anxiety when a change of incumbent occurs. Some individuals fear to lose all that has been gained during the incumbency now ending. Some begin to wonder whether the church, in which they have found a home, will still be so when the new priest arrives. Some even start packing their bags mentally as soon as the departure of the current incumbent is announced.

Yet the readings today say “**Be optimistic**” and they offer many reasons to have our hope in Jesus Christ, and to trust him to lead this community through our grief's and fears to the good future he has in store for us.

Firstly, in Isaiah 62:1-5, we are told that God promises to marry Israel and to rejoice over her. He promises to bring her sons back to her from exile to rebuild Zion, so that she will again be, as it says later in the chapter, “a City Not Forsaken”. (We heard President Obama telling the people of Haiti, “We will not forsake you. We will not forget you.” Well, he can say that, but if *God* says it, you can believe it!) It is easy to see, then, how we might apply this to ourselves. **We are not being cast off and abandoned.** On the contrary, God has brought us to a time when he can show us anew what he is able to do for his faithful people, for those who believe in him and obey his word.

Of course, we do pray every day or more often, “Lead us not into temptation” or “Do not bring us to the time of trial”. If we are thinking about the ordinary trials of church life – or of life -- I think we would have to agree that *God often does the very opposite of what we pray for.* He *does* bring us to the time of trial, a time when our character, courage, optimism, obedience, trust, faith, hope and love for him and each other are all tested. So why do we pray those words? Is it just to let him know we noticed he is not listening? Well, no. I think, in part, we pray those words because we are really praying “**Lord, don’t put us to a test that we will only fail**”.

Now if we have prayed believing, and if God has brought us, yet again, to the test - as individuals, as a community, as a parish, as two churches, and as groups who make up those churches and that parish - it is because **he knows we can pass the test.**

We too can know that we can show him - and parents always love to see their children do well – we can show him, and ourselves, and each other, that we do have character, courage, optimism, obedience, trust, faith, hope and love.

But in addition to this, even in the short time I have been here, it is also clear to me that you are people with a lot going for you, with a lot to offer. You are people with great strengths of character, real gifts and the hard-won wisdom of life experience. Of course, for many of us, our light doesn’t shine *quite* as brightly as it once did. Yet the fact is we are a community with human resources that many other parishes could only wish for. Now this is not a call for conceit or complacency. On the contrary, **it is a call to appreciate the strengths you have and to marshal them for the task ahead,** to stand up and be counted and to count for something good.

In 1 Corinthians 12:1-11, St Paul declares that a Christian faith community is endowed with gifts and he lists nine: **wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, working of miracles, prophecy, discernment of spirits, tongues and the interpretation of tongues.** Later in the same chapter he lists several kinds of people who exercise gifts in the church: **apostles, prophets, teachers, performers of deeds of power, healers, helpers, leaders** and, again, **tongue speakers.** Where there are tongue-speakers there have to be **tongue-interpreters,** so we can add that one in and, yet again, that gives us nine. (You may also know that Paul elsewhere lists nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, and fruits are always linked to gifts.)

Paul then urges his readers to desire these “higher gifts”, that is, the gifts and vocations listed. However he then says that, above these higher gifts, there is “**a still more excellent way**” -- the way of **faith, hope and love.** These are the (three) highest of the higher gifts, and

the only ones that “endure” (as he says), the only ones that you and I will take with us from this world into the Kingdom of heaven.

Now what is all this talk of gifts to us? Well, in another place Paul says, “Therefore you [as a church] are not lacking in any gift”. He did not say this, I’m sure, on the basis of a survey that he carried out of people and gifts in the church he was writing to. Rather, he **knows it by faith** to be an implication of **the gospel** and of **our empowering by the Holy Spirit**.

Again, in another place, we are taught by our Lord that, “God does not give the Spirit by measure” and Paul knows that this means that Christian communities, like ours, already have many gifts. It also means those gifts they *need* and do *not* have they will soon *receive*. And how will they receive them? By gift, of course, but if only they live by **faithfulness** to God and his word; by **hope** in God the giver of all good things; and by the **love of God – God’s power of loving --** poured into their hearts.

So here is God’s promise to us, and his call upon us. Thinking of the shape of the cross, if only we will believe and obey, we will find already among us, or we will shortly receive, **all the gifts we need** to raise the **upright of the cross**, connecting earth and heaven and renewing our relationship with God, but also to raise and set in place **the crossbeam of the cross**, the **bridge** from the past, through the present and into the future.

The Gospel reading today also confirms this message of hope. In John 2: 1-11, at the marriage in Cana of Galilee, Jesus demonstrates his power to turn **water of purification** into **wine**. This episode is capable of many interpretations but it can be understood as Jesus’ way of saying that he was about to move God’s people on from the old Jewish religion of ritual purity and the washing away of sin. He was about to lead them forward the next step, into something new, which would be like wine, rich and full of life and joy -- and so much so that they would say he had “kept the good wine until now”. So how might we apply this to ourselves?

Let me suggest to you that every Christian and every Christian community, over time, has a tendency to settle into religious routines. These are still good in themselves but they are not necessarily as *life-giving* as they once were. Could it be, then, that Jesus has arrived here in our church today, to tell us that it is time to revitalize and refresh this community of people of God? This has happened here before, and most recently in the last eight years under Catherine’s leadership. Perhaps God is saying it is time for it to happen again.

Have we, then, grown a little too settled? Do we need to take a fresh look at things? Have we -- as Jesus, in the Book of Revelation, says of one church – have we even lost our first love we had for him? And are we, as Scripture tells us, living, working and witnessing in power of the Spirit, and praying in the Spirit? Or has our religious life become too much a matter of social habits and religious routines?

How wonderful it is when the Holy Spirit arrives anew in a church and gives it new birth! I was only saying to Catherine yesterday, that I have seen this happen three times in my ministry life, not on a huge scale but certainly. And how much better that the **Holy Spirit** should burst into the church and set us on **fire**, than that Jesus should have to burst as he did into the Temple and rebuke his people for turning the house of God, the house of prayer, into a religious factory?

Our houses - God's house - ourselves as houses or temples of the Holy Spirit - we know everything needs refreshment and renewal from time to time, and I hope you will be able to approach this time as just this. Yet the big question, as Mary said to the angel, is "**But how shall these things be?**" To answer Mary's question, let me end with Psalm 36.

In this psalm, we are given God's own assurance that his people "shall be satisfied with the good things of [his] house", and he will "give them drink from the river of [his] delights" because "with God is the well of life". But this doesn't just happen. You may recall the old saying, "**Work as if everything depended upon you. Pray as if everything depended upon God**". So this is a partnership we are in with God. The good things of God's house will not just happen for us. We have our part to play.

So where do we start? The psalm prays that God will continue his merciful kindness **towards those who know him**, and his righteous dealing **with those who are true of heart**. We are setting out on a journey which will bring us to the appointment of a new Vicar, but that will be only the beginning. More importantly, we want it to lead us into a renewal of our parish, and launch us afresh into a time of building and growing. In fact, we want that coming time to be a time of such rejoicing that we will be moved to say, "Lord, you have kept the good wine until now".

And how shall that be? It can only be so if we set out as **people who know God**, and **people who are true of heart**. That is where we must start, for if we **know God** and have **true hearts**, we will be able see the way forward, step by step into the future. In London, 1939, the King comforted the people of Britain in their hour of need with the opening lines a poem, which begins

**I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year  
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'  
And he replied, 'Go into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of  
God  
That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way!'**

So too for us. If we know God, and are true of heart, we will be able to see our way, step by step into the future, and it will be for us "a known way". So God will bring us to that future he has in store for us, taking the good we have already received forward to meet the good we are about to receive. So he will reveal his plans to give us "a future and a hope".

John Spring