

Sermon for Evensong on the Fifteenth Sunday after Trinity, 4th 2016

Isaiah 43:14-44:5, John 5:30-47 - A Smart Choice

On Wednesday night I went to rather a good party. It took place in a car showroom in Guildford. It was in honour of the new registration plate which came in on 1st September. The idea was that you could pick up your new car at midnight and drive it away. I was one of the fortunate ones who were doing exactly that. Some of you may have noticed that my little Smart car has changed colour! Well, apart from nourishing my petrolhead tendencies, the party at the Smart showroom, still open late on Wednesday night, was interesting for another reason.

I had a long conversation with the managing director of the garage, who was a courteous and friendly South African, who told me that he had been living in Guildford for the last five years. Somehow or other we got on to talking about our Christian faith. You might think that it was rather surreal to be in a garage having a party at midnight: but I think that the fact that we were having a serious discussion about Christianity in a car showroom in Guildford at midnight probably tops even that!

I asked my new friend which church in Guildford he went to. He told me that it was a relatively new church which had been 'planted' by Holy Trinity Brompton, the London church where the Alpha course started. He had been in London, worshipping at Holy Trinity, originally – indeed I think he was part of the team exported by HTB, as it is known, to start the new congregation in Guildford.

I was a little bit surprised to think that Guildford needs another church, as there are a lot of thriving churches there already. Think of Holy Trinity, Saint Saviour's, Emmanuel, Stoughton or St John's, Stoke, to name just a few. All big, well-supported churches, within a mile of the centre.

But of course that doesn't matter. So far as spreading the gospel is concerned, the more the merrier. 'Go therefore and make disciples of all the world' (Matt. 28:19), was Jesus' great commission. I was intrigued, and I looked up the new church on the Internet, as you do.

What was interesting to me was that, when my new friend introduced it to me, the thing he said was, 'There is a new church plant in Guildford, which meets in a theatre.' And then he went on, 'You know, Guildford has the highest rate of marriage breakdown in the country.'

Now I may be doing him a disservice, because he didn't say that this, but I wondered whether the statistic about the divorces in Guildford was some kind

of mission statement. Actually I'm not sure that mission statements are necessarily a very good thing.

Nevertheless, it got me thinking about why we are Christians: almost, what's it for? It seemed like my friend in Guildford felt that the very high divorce rate was, in itself, an important reason for having more Christians. It may be a gross oversimplification, but I got the feeling that perhaps the idea was, that if you were better disciples, if you loved Jesus more dearly and followed him more nearly, then there would be fewer divorces. That seems, of course, perfectly laudable. It is, though, rather a surprising objective, if you put it at the top of the headlines, as the most notable reason for going to church.

The sanctity of family life has always been at the heart of Christianity, and indeed it has been since the time of the ten commandments – 'Thou shalt not commit adultery' (although of course that's not the only reason why marriages fail). But it seemed almost that that was the new church's 'strap line'.

But what is the appeal of a particular church? What is its unique selling proposition? Are there different USPs for different churches, or is there one central USP, which is what Jesus brings? Why do you go at all, and why do you go to one church rather than another? Incidentally, when I looked up the new church's website, the divorce rate in Guildford was right up there again, prominently mentioned. They didn't mention other social concerns, such as perhaps a mission to refugees or to relieve poverty, perhaps by supporting their local food bank, although I'm sure they do that too.

So go back to the question, "What is Christianity for?" Is it to make us better people, so we don't get divorced so much, for example? The difficulty is that good Christians still do bad things. Indeed, right at the very beginning, St Paul, in his letter to the Romans, chapter 7, confesses that although he wants to do the right thing, he still does what he does not want to do, he falls for temptation, the bad option, every time. Although he knows what God's law lays down, he does not always follow it. (See Romans 7:14-19).

Are Christians better, morally, than other thoughtful human beings? They are subject to the same temptations and the same weaknesses. If you follow what St Paul said in Romans 7, you'd conclude that Christians are, morally, nothing special. That may be overly harsh: because, as St Paul says, in his letter to the Galatians, the fruits of the Holy Spirit are a number of moral virtues. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, fidelity, gentleness, and self-control. (Galatians 5:22). If you are a Christian, if you have been saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ, then there will be signs of your having been saved in the good that you do as a result.

This certainly got me thinking about us here at St Mary's. I'm not aware if we do have a spectacularly high divorce rate. But if we were to go off and plant another church in order to spread the good news of Jesus far and wide, what would we home in on? What would be our unique selling proposition? Of course, some of you will immediately say, 'Hang on, that's exactly what St Mary's actually did, at the turn of the last century: when we, we at St Mary's, set up St Andrew's, Oxshott.' St Andrew's, Oxshott was a church plant, a church plant from St Mary's.

I'm sorry that I am not a good enough historian to be able to tell you what it was that they took from St Mary's to the good people of Oxshott by way of a gospel message. Whatever it was, it was obviously a good message, because St Andrew's, Oxshott has thrived ever since. We must all pray for them to find a new vicar soon, to step into Jeremy Cresswell's shoes, as he is now enjoying retirement, having been their much-loved vicar for 25 years.

I wonder what the church planters 100 years ago identified as the particular spiritual need of the new community growing up in Oxshott. Perhaps that can be a group discussion topic! You know, I am inclined to think that, rather than identifying a particular social ill and suggesting that more discipleship would fix it, the dynamic for a church like ours - and, dare I say, I think it might have been the same 100 years ago - might have been - might be today - what is in our lessons today.

In the prophet Isaiah:

*'I am the Lord, your Holy One, the creator of Israel, your King.
Thus saith the Lord, which maketh a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters..'*

There is our Lord, our creator. He confronts us. We ought to respect, to worship, our Creator. But the danger is that we ignore Him. In the Old Testament, nearly 3,000 years ago, Isaiah laments this:

*'But thou hast not called upon me, O Jacob; but thou hast been weary of me, O Israel.
Thou hast not brought me the small cattle of thy burnt offerings; neither hast thou honoured me with thy sacrifices.'*

Again, in St John's Gospel, Jesus says,

'And the Father himself, which hath sent me, hath borne witness of me. Ye have neither heard his voice at any time, nor seen his shape.'

And ye have not his word abiding in you: for whom he hath sent, him ye believe not.

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me.'

God is there, in front of us, around us, at the 'ground of our being' [Paul Tillich]. And yet we are preoccupied, we worry about ourselves, about our needs. Yes, we are concerned to improve our lives, whether there are divorces, or bankruptcies, or chronic illnesses, or jobs lost. But we forget God.

I'm sure we agree with the new church people in Guildford that these things like divorces are signs of sin, of people being separated from the love of God. So the driving force of our mission is to remind people about Jesus, about the fact that He came to be God among us, to show that the Creator cares for us.

We need to remind people about God, about Jesus. We believe that if you do believe and trust in Him, you will have that sure and certain hope, the hope of eternal life. You will, while you live your human life, still be subject to the pull of sin, but the more your faith, the bigger the hole you make in your life for Jesus, the more you will show those blessed signs of love which St Paul told the Galatians about. And that works just as well in our beautiful Saxon church as it does in a theatre. We are all God's people.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant