

CHURCH@HOME: 8th May 2020 – Fourth Sunday after Easter

Readings: Acts 9:30-end
John 10:22-30

In both our readings today we discover that what God wants for us is LIFE – and life in capital letters! Life to be lived abundantly in response to the forgiving love of God shown to us not only through Jesus' death, but particularly death defeated through his subsequent resurrection to new life. Our response to that love is to share it with all.

Dorcas, also known as Tabitha, had been a creative woman transforming rolls of beautiful fabric into beautiful clothes to be worn and enjoyed by her local community. She was brought back from death to life.

The reading from John's Gospel tells us more about the escalating conflict between Jesus and the Jews. There were some who genuinely wanted to know who Jesus was – remember these were those who lived in the world of the Old Testament. They had the prophecies which were coming to life in front of their very eyes. But there were others whose very lives were being challenged. This challenge of God goes right back to the beginning of Time – life or death! And we, who live in New Testament times, are also challenged by God, and have to make the choice as well.

We are being challenged to a radical way of understanding the meaning of mission. Many large, and small, corporate entities have "mission statements". The word 'mission' actually comes from the Latin verb "mitto", to send, and we are 'sent out' at the end of our service when the Deacon says: "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord" and we respond "In the name of Christ. Amen."

Our mission statement at St John's is "Living God's Love" and we are asked to live it with generosity and joy, with imagination and courage for the sake of His world and in the name of Jesus.

Today's Mark of Mission is "to respond to human need by loving service". And, boy, there is so much human need in our world today, both to teach and to demonstrate God's love to one and all.

Jesus used some striking imagery for the mission of loving service. The Samaritan didn't just take pity on the dying man he found in the ditch. He gave first aid, picked him up and carted him off to an inn, nursed him through the night and then paid the innkeeper to look after him until he was well enough to go on his way. Jesus and the lawyer in the story call that mercy. Mercy recognises a hurting human being and shares in that suffering enough to do something about it. Pity on the other hand is a kind of distant sorry that doesn't take any personal responsibility.

An essential part of our spiritual journey as Christians is about improving the balance between self-love and love of others. And it takes practice – remembering that the world is not all about me, whether that means sharing toys in the nursery, letting someone into the traffic ahead of me, or figuring out that all we have is a gift, and it's meant to be shared. It's not easy. The lure of 'me first' can be great!

It takes discipline – spiritual discipline. Paul describes it as running the race. Jesus had his own training during his 40 days in the desert. For us, regularly reading our Bibles and taking part in the services here on a daily or weekly basis reminds us what it's all about. Our task is to put into action.

Over the centuries each generation has benefitted from the planning and generosity of previous generations and what they had planned and built. For some this will have been to replace the dilapidated, the worn out, or something new and innovative, and in the timescale of things may not necessarily have been enjoyed by the benefactors. Our church hall is dying. It is not only collapsing into dilapidation but is also unhealthy due to the leaking roof and subsequent damp. The building is past its 'use by date' and needs to be replaced. It's up to us today to play our part in providing for its replacement – a new parish centre available to be used in a variety of ways.

As the Church in this time and place, we are called to love ourselves and our neighbours, the world in which we live. We are a community of faith with a common resolve to pour our hearts and our money into this project for those who will live long enough to see what a difference it will make, and for those coming after us ... today's Little Acorns who will grow into mature trees, as well as those still just a twinkle in the eyes of our loving Father God.

We are being called to live out our faith practically and generously in the future mission and ministry of St John's - a communal effort with a willingness to do what is necessary to bring our resolve to fruition. What we don't know now is how many peoples' lives will be changed because there will be a new parish centre here. Only God knows that. But for it to happen we have to do it.

In November 2000 I arrived in Hertfordshire, to a village where there was a small 10th century church. We had heating and light and an outside tap. No hall, no toilet. It took over 12 years to raise the funds and build a toilet and small kitchenette inside the church.

We regularly pray "your kingdom come, your will be done" - having already lost two years to Covid-19, we don't have 12 years. You may remember we launched the fund-raising for the centre just four weeks before the first lockdown – we have to get our act together now and pick up the pieces ... so let us go out into the world today and respond to the need we see with love, playing our part, be it large or small, that we may bring Project Phoenix to life! Our actions are love made manifest!