

A sermon preached by Eleanor Whalley at St Andrew's, Soham on Advent Sunday 2018. Jer. 33: 14-16; Lk 21: 25-38

May I speak and may we hear in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Some of you have heard me say before

that the most helpful piece of advice

I received when I got here

came from Mike Harrison, the Head of St Andrew's School.

I asked him what he wanted from me as the vicar.

He told me that when he was a child he'd gone to a Christian School.

He said whenever the Priest arrived, he used to feel excited.

That's what he wanted for the children of St Andrew's School.

What is so helpful to me about that thought

is the way it reminds me that the most important thing

for me as a vicar and for us as a church

is to keep – and keep building – a positive association, a positive relationship

between us and the wider community.

Everything flows from that.

Without a positive association,

the words we speak, the services we hold and the faith we seek to foster

will fall like seeds on dry ground.

If the children in assembly switch off before I've started because they expect to be bored,

nothing I say will get through to them. They won't be listening.

They need to feel excited when they see me -

they need to want to listen.

And what's true about children,

I always think,

is generally true about adults as well.

What went on here on Friday with the Christmas Market,

What will go on with Christingle on Saturday and Sunday,

with the angel bombing, with Community Carols and with the Carol Service –

what's been going on, thanks to so many of you, for so many years;

all these things help build relationships.

Activities which mightn't seem particularly churchy

provide ways for the church to engage with the wider community,

they help banish the preconception

that the Church – 'Church' capital C and 'church' small c is an exclusive club –

a club you need to be a certain type of person

living a certain type of life to belong to;

a club with nothing relevant to say or to offer to those who aren't its members.

A club whose discourse is (at best) boring.

I know you know that - if you didn't know that I wouldn't want to be here -

but I don't think it hurts to be reminded why we're doing what we're doing.

Particularly in this busy Advent season.

Build those relationships –

Find ways to connect –

Find a common language –

And we'll find we're experiencing Church as *ecclesia*:

Church as gathered community –

Church which draws people together from all walks of life;

Church which suddenly people want to listen to,

and Church which listens in return.

Church, in other words, as a mouthpiece

for Christ's universal message of life and hope.

Hope is a message we all need to hear.

Most of us, I imagine, need hope in our own lives,

and hope in the lives of those we care about.

Today, surely, we need hope as a nation –

hope as the British people –

hope as we stand – if we believe what the experts tell us –

on the brink of the possibility

of the greatest economic slump since the 2nd World War.

[Read Luke 21: 25-26]

Luke is predicting the apocalypse –
the literal end of the world.

We're not at that point,
but fear, distress and confusion today are real.

They're real for many people –
they may be real of some of us; real for people we know and love.

For many people,
the financial and political uncertainty in this country today
will feel like 'the end of the world'.

As Church – as The Church and as Church here in Soham - we need to ask ourselves –

I'm sure we already ask ourselves –
what should be our Christian response?

Is there anything we as Christians –
anything we as Church –
should be doing in response to how things are?

One thing we can do
is keep on building that positive association
between Church and wider community.

Keep plugging away with events and activities
which do away with the fallacy of 'them' and 'us' –
events which bring us together with our neighbours;
events that build friendship and respect;
events which help us get to know people who perhaps aren't like us;
events which help insight and understanding to grow.

None of us can help anyone unless we've a grasp of what they're up against.

The same goes for preaching and evangelism – for any kind of mission.

Pope Francis said,

Priests – and I'd extend that to Christians more widely – Priests should be 'shepherds with the smell of sheep' –
Priests, he said, should be 'not just concerned with their own congregations, but also be fishers of men'.

If we extend that from 'Priests' to 'church members',

What the Pope is saying is that we should all be concerned for the world beyond ourselves.

We need to get to know that world; we need to understand it better.

We need to build links with the wider community;

make friendships so close that we smell of our friends.

If a shepherd smells like the sheep,

that shepherd is no longer a threat.

The shepherd is accepted, and listened to.

There's no point preaching –

no point leading an assembly –

no point trying to tell the Good News or doing any kind of mission

if we've not first established a positive relationship

with whoever it is we are speaking to.

Relationships are make or break:

our hearers need to be willing to listen;

and what we say needs to be relevant.

And we need to know and respect our audience.

Today's Gospel gives us further advice:

'Now when these things begin to take place' – these terrifying things –

'stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near'.

In other words: 'Chin up'

Keep your eyes fixed on Jesus –

set your minds on the goal –

I talked about that last week.

Don't give up: bear witness to the hope that is in you.

It's not always easy,

but give it our best shot, and people will notice.

People will know who it is who gives us strength.

If they don't know, my experience is they'll ask where it comes from.

Strength is enviable.

They might want that same strength for themselves.

Our stickability – our courage -

might just draw others to Christ.

‘Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away’.

If there’s a word, or a phrase, or an image that hits us as we’re going about our daily lives –

hits us in church – hits us in a hymn, in a reading, in the prayers, even – miracles do happen - in a sermon

Then let’s cling onto it – maybe write it down – find a way to remember it.

If I don’t write things down, I’ll’ve forgotten them by the evening. I’ll probably’ve forgotten them by lunchtime.

That word might just be a channel for God’s grace.

And God’s grace will see God’s people through.

And finally:

Verse 36: ‘Be alert, pray at all times...’.

Jesus tells his hearers to pray:

pray in the midst of this turbulent world.

Pray is what Jesus does himself –

That’s how today’s reading ended:

Jesus ‘would go out at night, to the Mount of Olives’ – he’d spend the night there.

39 verses later,

we see him doing just that.

His prayer is so intense his sweat falls like great drops of blood.

If Christ needed/needs to pray – then so do we.

We need to pray for ourselves,

We need to pray for our nation.

Pray for our government, and pray for their decision-making.

Pray for ordinary people -

for all who are afraid.

Pray for those whose jobs –

whose incomes –

whose stability looks like it lies on the line.

Pray for God's Church –

for The Church –

and for our church –

Pray that God gives us the grace to be his witnesses;

grace to be channels of life and hope;

grace to keep building those positive links –

means by which we engage with a world and with a God so much vaster – so much wider – than we can understand.

The God about whom there's always more to learn.

Amen.