

THE GROWING CHURCH

(Acts 13.1-7, Luke 9.1-6)

Last week we heard about the new church from Andrew, this week it's me with the growing church, next week it's John Lambert on the persecuted church and finally it will be Mark Nile; the global church.

It's hard not to follow into one another and I nearly thought Andrew was last week but no worries, you can trust him, let's hope you can trust me too.

OK, the growing church. From our readings today there is a lot said about sending people but not too much on the growth. We know of course that the church exploded in growth on the Day of Pentecost, its birthday. 3,000 were added in one day. Since that day there has been an increase over all the world, such that more than a third of its population say they are Christians.

So in numbers what is the truth behind all the statistics? Are we growing or are we declining? In 2012 the church times reported that since 1980 to the present; 30+ years we have had substantial and sustained growth in Britain, there has also been substantial church decline. So what is going on?

There are now more than 1 million Christians in the UK from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds. A vast increase compared with 50 years ago. In one single, medium sized city, York, new congregations have been formed at an average rate of 1 a year, since 1980 again 30+ years so 30+ congregations.

Even in our own C of E, we are not immune from church growth. The electoral roll of the diocese of London the largest Anglican diocese in the country, has grown by 70% since 1990. Numbers don't always mean everything, and we know that statistics can be made up in all sorts of ways. People migrate, they move from church to church, they have children and they die as well. So, numbers can and do alter all the time.

All these factors have to be included if we are talking about church growth from a numerical point of view.

How about the growing church from a spiritual point of view? Are we a growing or declining church? More to the point is St Mary's more like Jesus or less than Jesus? I would say we are growing but I have only been here for a few years. What do you say? Good opening line when we all have tea/coffee later...

First let's deal with our Scripture readings from today and what they mean to us. In our Gospel reading from Luke we get a shortened version of "the mission of the 12". In Mark's Gospel we get another shortened version "the sending out of the 12". Matthew says a lot more about this "mission" or "sending out". In fact, he devotes considerable attention to Jesus's instructions to his disciples regarding their mission. Let's keep ourselves to Luke's passage.

He called them. He gave them power and authority over all demons and power to cure all diseases. He sent them to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick. Then he said "take nothing with you, take nothing for the journey!" WHATTTT! Nothing, no money, no food, no spare clothes and nothing to defend yourself with. OK off you go then." "Lord can't I take a clean hankie?" "Nope nothing, off you go!"

I'm sure you can remember being a child and every day before school or before a trip out anywhere; your mum or your dad if he was at home saying things like, "have you got your dinner money, have you got your lunch box, your school books, your coat?" My mum used to ask me if I still had my head screwed on; I can't think why...

Well, not Jesus. When he sends you somewhere, he equips you with his Holy Spirit (only you can't see him), so whatever you meet on your way, you have everything you need. 2 stories I have heard from this lectern illustrate what I mean.

Gill told us a few weeks ago that she bumped into a friend in need of help, she needed prayer and answers, but not from Gill, she needed it

from God. So he had Gill rush out in her scruff (sorry Gill), just so he could intercede with her friend without Gill getting in the way if you know what I mean.

Last week, Lewis told us about his son the vicar who had to go out with nothing but his frustrations of getting his bike from town, trying to catch a bus in the pouring rain. Only for God to provide a God incident, where a lady in a car gave the son a lift, asked him what he did and was able to receive from God the support and encouragement she needed.

That's why Jesus sends us out with nothing extra, so that his Holy Spirit can work through us without any of our restrictions. Let's face it, if it was left up to us, we would come up with an overcomplicated answer, we would get in the way, our personalities, our ideas and our prejudices.

So that's the part of sending us out, but where to? Your home, your workplace, your school/college, your community and even your local church! God still sends people to other churches doesn't he? Didn't Brian and others come here from All Saints', sent by David Osman? For the purpose of doing his will, the great commission. The end of Matthew and Mark says "go to every part of the world and preach the good news everywhere."

Jesus doesn't send all of us to the ends of the earth, it might be to the end of your garden. But he does want us all to have the same Spirit inside us, encouraging one another to go and tell others about Jesus.

In Acts, we read about the leaders in the church at Antioch. They were from all over; Barnabas from Cyprus, Saul/Paul from Cilicia now part of Turkey, Simon Niger suggests the Latin for black so he could be from North Africa, Manaen grew up with Herod the tetrarch so Roman maybe and Lucius possibly a Hellenistic Jew, a Greek Jew. According to my commentary anyhow.

The point is they were just a bunch of men from all over, used by God when they came together to fast and pray, i.e. put themselves out of the picture and allow God to work in and through them.

So we roll it forward; Paul, Barnabas and now John are all over Cyprus; preaching the word of God in all the Jewish synagogues. So much so that the proconsul (governor of the province) Sergius Paulus wants to meet these guys. The story doesn't end there, Acts 13.8-12 (read out from Bible...) the enemy always oversteps his mark, we need to beware but like Paul, put him in his place, under our feet.

They couldn't have known this was going to happen, they simply did as they were told: they went to Cyprus, spoke to anyone who would listen and told them the gospel of Jesus; history is His story. People believed and many were saved we presume. When the boss of the island believes I am sure many others followed.

Growth occurred; the church exploded at that time in history. The church is still growing today: fast in Africa, Asia and South America. Less so in Europe and North America. But as I said, its not all about the numbers.

2 weeks ago; four from our small church, (well its not as small as some churches I have preached in, I once preached at Chop Gate Methodist Church near Bilsdale. Pam, Trevor and their 2 small girls came to support us and doubled the congregation, God bless them).

So 2 weeks ago, 4 people from our church were confirmed, sort of added to the church, clicked in at the door, recorded in the book in the vestry. No, no, no. This is about God working it out in their lives, within them by his Holy Spirit, enabling them to take part in whatever capacity that is.

It's about their journey through this earthly life with Jesus as their companion. It's about a journey we all take when we surrender to Jesus, give him our mustard seed and watch him grow us into trees firmly planted by his stream of living water.

For us in St Mary's, and wherever God sends us to next, if there is a next, he might just want to keep you right here. Its about growing as a person, growing as a body, as a church, a growing church.

Nobody wants to grow in size unless you're a child or very small. We should all want to grow as Christians. The church calls us baby Christians when we first start and mature Christians as we grow up on his word. No one is a perfect Christian; a friend once said to me in a joke (I think it was a joke) Brian, if you find a perfect church, don't go there! (I think he was a friend).

Galatians 5v22 "but the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Anyone here think they have overcome their own flesh that they can say this is true of them? Not me, and I don't think any of us have it all. But we can keep growing in love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Take nothing with you, only ask the Holy Spirit to be your guide, believe he sends you to others, beware of the enemy and arm yourself with God's protection - his word made flesh in Jesus.

GROWTH IS HERE TO STAY.