

THE VISION – GROWING

(2 Corinthians 5:14-21 and Matthew 28:16-28)

This sermon is in three parts:

The first part; putting our theme into its historical perspective. You may find this informative.

The second part; what was the message of Jesus, and how does this affect the church today. You may find this surprising.

The third part; how can we spread this message of Jesus and so grow his followers. You may find this disturbing, in which case may I apologise for this now.

The first part; You may find this informative; putting church attendance in perspective. In Medieval times anecdotal evidence suggests that almost everyone went to church each Sunday, and on other Saint's Days and Holy Days as well. Medieval times cover about 400 years from about 1100 to 1500AD, to the time of Henry VIII.

The earliest reliable national statistics on church attendance which we have are from the year 1851. In 1851 for the first and only time church and chapel attendance, was required to be recorded in an official government census. It counted actual bums on seats or rather bums on pews. This was the official Government 10 yearly census of 1851, which is still done every 10 years today, though church attendance is no longer recorded on it. This census revealed that on average 40.5% of the adult population attended church or chapel every Sunday in 1851. Today that figure is 6.3%, a tremendous drop, and leaves plenty of room for growing. In particular in 1851 the best attendance was in the county of Bedfordshire with 56.5% attendance. The worst was our own county Durham with just 25% attendance. The numbers showed that roughly half were attending C of E churches and half attending the places of worship of other denominations.

The second part; You may find this surprising. What is the message of Jesus and how does this impact on the church today. The message of Jesus is that he came to give us eternal life. A message which today has little impact on the church for the church as a whole quietly sets it to one side. By church in this sermon I mean the whole church in its national setting including all denominations.

We will begin by taking a fresh look at the ministry of Jesus. When reading any one of the gospels all the way through, rather than just a few verses at a time, we are struck by the fact that Jesus in the gospels, speaks far more about eternal life and things eternal than he does about earthly life.

Yet today the church does the opposite. The church promotes how Christianity impacts on earthly life whilst for the most part almost ignoring our Lord's teaching on eternal life. In John's gospel Jesus tells us why he came to earth; "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn3:16). Yes the church quite rightly focuses on and much has been written and said about "God so loved the world" and "belief" and "gave his one and only son". But when we come to "eternal life" the church quietly puts that on one side.

What does Paul tell us about this? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians; For if the dead are not raised, then Christ has not been raised either. And if Christ has not been raised your faith is futile; If only for this life we have hope in Christ we are to be pitied more than all men (1Cor15:16,17,19). In other words Paul is telling us very bluntly, if there is no resurrection and there is no eternal life then Christianity is a waste of time and futile. What St Paul writes certainly informs us that the essential message of Jesus is that he came to give us eternal life.

When was the last time you heard a bishop or the Pope or a Christian leader speaking at length or even briefly about eternal life on the TV or anywhere else for that matter. I cannot think of one, yet Jesus spent much of his ministry teaching us about eternal life and on the occasions

on which he spoke about this earthly life it was usually in connection with or to explain eternal life.

In St John's gospel Jesus speaks specifically about eternal life. The well-known 7 "I am" sayings of Jesus found in John's gospel are all about eternal life. I am the bread of life we have no excuses for missing the meaning of that one. I am the door a bit more tricky but the door to where - eternal life of course.]

The earthly activities which Jesus sets out in the Beatitudes tell us how to attain eternal life. For Jesus tells us theirs is the kingdom of heaven. More on that is later. Jesus does not say the activities portrayed in the Beatitudes will lead to a long, successful and happy life. When we read the parables of Jesus, we find most are about eternal life and some Jesus specifically begins with the words the kingdom of God is like. Even the parable of the Good Samaritan is told in answer to the question; "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Paul and the New Testament letter writers, write about the resurrection and eternal life. This is because these truths were the bedrock of the teaching and missionary work of the disciples and first Christians. In those times every Sunday was Easter Day. Every Sunday Christians celebrated our Lord's resurrection and the resurrection to eternal life of Christians already dead and Christians anticipated their own resurrection to eternal life. Yet today the church glosses over the resurrection and eternal life, except perhaps once a year at Easter.

The attitude to death of the first Christians is revealed in the writings of St Ignatius. St Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch in Syria was martyred in 107AD, long before Christianity came to Britain. He was sentenced to death for his Christian beliefs and ordered to be taken under the guard of 10 Roman soldiers from Antioch to Rome to be killed in Rome by lions in the Coliseum. On his slow journey to Rome St Ignatius wrote 7 letters to the churches in the major cities through which he past, in a similar manner to which St Paul wrote his letters to different churches. In his letters St Ignatius instructs Christians to do nothing to try to free him and in his letter to the Christians in Rome St Ignatius writes "I am God's

wheat and shall be ground by the teeth of wild animals that I may become Christ's pure bread. I prefer death in Christ Jesus to power over the farthest limits of the earth." St Ignatius is telling us he prefers death in Jesus to anything this life has to offer him.

What more do we know about the eternal life which Jesus came to bring us?

We do not step into eternal life when we die for eternal life is with us now. Jesus tells us "I am the resurrection and the life. I am means right now. Jesus does not say I will be the resurrection and the life. I am living eternal life. You are living eternal life. At communion we are reminded of this when we say the words "The body of Christ keep you in eternal life." We acknowledge this in our Eucharistic prayer which states "with all who stand before you in earth and heaven we worship you." We have been lulled into thinking that God's heavenly kingdom is somewhere in the future and we only get to it when we die. This poses the question where are the disciples of Jesus and all those Christians who have gone before us. God is not like a passenger on a station waiting for his train, the kingdom of heaven, to come in.

In his parables Jesus tells us the kingdom of God **is** like, **is** present tense. In the beatitudes Jesus tells us theirs **is** the kingdom of heaven, **is** present tense. In John's gospel Jesus tells us I **am** the resurrection and the life, **am** present tense. If God's kingdom is in the future where is God now? If God's kingdom is in the future, what is God doing being involved in your life now. God and his kingdom go together now, always and forever.

God's kingdom is wherever God's laws are obeyed. Be they the laws of Physics in some far off Galaxy or God's moral laws and values here on earth, even if you should be the only person obeying them.

The third part; How can we spread this message of Jesus that he came to bring us eternal life, in order to grow his followers. This part you may find disturbing and if so then let me apologise for this now.

On a personal level I am looking forward to dying. In a similar way to how I look forward to a coming holiday, but with much more excitement and anticipation, and I have no need to do any planning for Jesus has done it all for me. As Paul puts it in his epistle to the Philippians; I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body (Phil1:23,24).

I hope, if I have a choice, to drop down dead. When I tell people this they threw up their hands in horror and tell me how inconsiderate I am. "Just think about the shock you're going to give to those people present when you drop down dead." They tell me. Well I reply they shouldn't be shocked. We're all going to die. We all know we're going to die. So we should be expecting to be visited by death. After all at 70+ I've well and truly reached the dropping down dead age.

Today's society attempts to live as if death does not happen. It sweeps death under the carpet, which is one of the reasons why we have the need for a growing army of bereavement councillors who were unheard of 50 and more years ago. As Christians knowing that we live our lives based on eternal values, then we can prepare for death and welcome death knowing that death is but a continuation of what we already value most in our earthly life.

I am looking forward to dying not because in some magical way I am going to step from this life into eternal life. I am looking forward to dying so that I can be with Christ and get rid of the things which now hinder my being with Jesus. Death will enable me to get the things of this world off my back. Paul sums these up when he writes; For I know that nothing good dwells within me. I can will what is right but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want to do but the evil I do not want to do I keep on doing (Rom7:18, 19). It will be great to get such things off my back.

We must note that when the percentage of people attending church was high, the church was actively teaching about eternal life.

In medieval times the church unashamedly put people in touch with eternal life, by actively portraying itself as the gateway to heaven. This enabled people to think of their lives in an eternal context. Today we might not approve of the excesses of the medieval church's lurid and mechanical view of heaven and hell. These excesses lead to some faults in the church. These included the sale of indulgences. By paying money to the church as a penance, a person would be issued with a sort of receipt, called an indulgence, which declared their sins had been forgiven. This was seen as a means of ensuring that when a person died they went straight to heaven. Indulgences were seen as a ticket to heaven. What is often overlooked is should that person have been genuinely sorry for their sins then they would have gone to heaven, the error was paying for that forgiveness, for God gives forgiveness freely. The real error however, was that the church built in an insurance policy whereby it was possible to pay for the sins of someone who had already died. A nice little earner for the church. This is recorded in a little rhyme which has come down to us; "When the coin in the brass bowl shall ring. The lost soul from hell shall spring."

Martin Luther and his fellow reformers saw the futility of this practice and extolled St Paul's teaching that a person was justified by their faith. This means faith that Jesus died for our sins and so paid the price for them, and thereby secured a place in God's heavenly kingdom for us. This teaching also enabled the church to put people in touch with eternal life. This reformation teaching had received a further boost from the Evangelical Revival which affected all denominations and was begun by John and Charles Wesley and others beginning in 1738. The effect of this Evangelical revival were still being felt in those 40.5% church attendance statistics of 1851.

Justification by faith also put people in touch with eternal life. This faith saw the church and its teaching as the gateway to heaven and as in medieval times this led to a high percentage of people attending church.

The decline in church attendance over the past century has been accompanied by the church in its missionary out-reach focusing on the

earthly issues of this earthly life whilst ignoring the heavenly matters of eternal life. Whereas in the times of high church attendance the church focused people's minds on the things of eternal life as a means of awakening people's faith.

How can we once again spread the message of that good news of Jesus that he came to bring us eternal life, by getting people to think about eternal life.

We have just sung the hymn; Jesus lives thy terrors now, Can no more o death appal us. This is not an Easter hymn if we followed St Paul and the first Christians we would sing it every Sunday. If this hymn means anything to us and we are not just whistling in the dark. And if you wish to spread the message of Jesus that he came to bring us eternal life. Then try telling people that you are looking forward to dying. It is a conversation stopper. You will certainly get a good opportunity to speak about your faith and eternal life because people will ask you Why? And give you their full attention because they will want to know the answer, for death remains a taboo subject and topic of fear in our society.

Funerals can be an appropriate place to raise this issue because death is on people's minds. Though, as has happened to me, you might get told off for saying it as you will be told, it will upset the people who are mourning. This is unfortunately true so you do have to tread carefully. However talking about Jesus coming to give us eternal life should be a comfort at such times not a source of upset. After all, this life pales into insignificance, when compared with the length and beauty of eternal life.

Some people are happy to talk about death. Funeral plans are now being advertised on the television. The more you pay, the posher your your coffin will be, though in the end it will all go up in smoke at the crem. Some people talk about death as a reminder of their mortality. A friend of mine is very much into Taekwondo and has been out to China to receive instruction from a grand master. He told me the grand master kept his coffin and his wife's coffin in their living room. They made good benches to sit on. They served as a reminder to them of their mortality, and would save their family some funeral expenses.

If others can talk about death why shouldn't Christians declare that they are looking forward to dying. If you do this you will certainly get people's attention. This will provide you with an ample opportunity to speak about your faith in Jesus and his message which is the offer of eternal life to all.

Jesus in his teaching was far more concerned with the next world than with this world. However today, the church seems to be more concerned with this world than the next. This can make it difficult to raise the topic of eternal life without running the risk of upsetting someone especially those who have been recently bereaved, or who know someone who is terminally ill. In fact the reverse should be true for the gift of eternal life which Jesus offers to all should be a comfort and an encouragement not a burden in these situations. After all eternal life is going to last a great deal longer than anything this world can offer.

If eternal life figured more prominently in the teaching of the whole national church, as it did in the teaching of Jesus then it would make the subject easier to raise, for eternal life affects our lives now. The Christian values and standards by which we live are eternal. They will last forever and as such are very different from those of this world. For the Christian values and standards by which we live are those of eternal life, the eternal life we live now, and as such they are eternal. They will last forever.

In contrast the values and standards of this world, which are based on the here and now, will pass away, just as the here and now will pass away. If the church actively proclaimed this then Christians and non-Christians alike would then know that Christians lived their lives by eternal values which will continue with them through death. Christian values would then be seen in their eternal setting, contrasting them with the here and now values of this world. Thus enabling others to be drawn to Christ, as they too come to see the eternal nature of those Christian values, and through them the eternal life which Jesus came to bring us. This is what Paul is writing about in this morning's epistle reading when he tells us we are to be Ambassadors for Jesus.

Finally, not only does Jesus teach us about eternal life. Jesus is raised from the dead to demonstrate his authority over death as proof that he can ensure that we will not perish but have eternal life. Just think about a manufacturing company who made a pill which would give people eternal life. How much would people pay for that. People would be clamouring for it. In modern marketing terms God provides us with the complete marketing package. If you like the sales talk, and the practical demonstration that the product works. The message of Jesus is that he has come to give us eternal life. Jesus teaches us about eternal life. Then when Jesus might be accused of so much hot air Jesus demonstrates the truth of his teaching practically for us as he is raised from the dead. So the church really has no excuse for not putting eternal life centre stage in its shop window in its missionary work and outreach as it has successfully done so in times past.

So I say to you: Go and tell people in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ that you are looking forward to dying and reigning with Jesus.
Amen.