

Sunday 5 March 2006: Lent 6.30pm Sermon Series: Building Community

Community on the Move

Readings: Genesis 12. 1-5; Luke 9. 57-62

I've called this reflection *Community on the Move* because we will be moving. The work has started on the crypt, we are getting used to walking past the scaffolding and at some point next year we won't be able to meet in the church as refurbishment takes place and it will close for a short period of time. This has led me to think: do we need a building in which to meet, is it simply a convenient place in which to gather or is it a place which defines our style of worship? I suppose the latter is true, the simplicity of a Quaker meeting place or the ornate nature of a high anglo-catholic church makes a difference to the way we worship; different things are helpful to different people at different times. This is a well used and well loved building. What questions does it raise when it isn't available, is it a time to explore our faith and the way we worship or a time of insecurity and feeling unsettled? Both perhaps. The practicalities of worshipping together as a community mean that we need to find a way of doing so, whether it be in our usual building, another place altogether, online for those who have access to a computer, via the radio during the times the church hosts Sunday Worship, smaller groups in people's homes.

St Martins encompasses many different communities within its weekly worship: the English and the Chinese, those who meet at the lunchtime and early evening services, those who go to either Sunday morning or Sunday evening. Those who come each week, those who come sporadically, visitors from outside London who come whenever they are in town, visitors who may only ever come once. We are still part of the same community, albeit shifting, changing, diverse.

We ourselves are likely to belong to many different communities: family, different groups of friends, work, study, voluntary work, groups connected with hobbies and leisure activities, worship, neighbours, seeing people in cafés, restaurants and pubs we go to regularly, people we know through our children, using a studio for something creative. Some need a regular place in which to meet, others are encounters which may take place anywhere. Jesus said "Where two or three are gathered together, there will I be also." I wonder where we imagine this gathering to take place.

Thinking back to some of the significant conversations in my life they have taken place in the launderette, an art gallery, on the train, in the street, on a traffic island in the middle of Tottenham Court Road as well as in my home, my office, my church. When Christ lived, he seized the moment; he spoke to people at the roadside, by a lake, from the top of a mountain. None of which strikes as odd, he met people where they were. So if we meet together in another denomination or another faith's place of worship, an office building, an empty theatre or restaurant, will that affect our faith, will our praying, singing of hymns and so on be changed, diminished, enhanced or just different. Some of you may have gone to the Lent talks which were held in the National Gallery one year; we looked at various paintings, talked about them and then said a brief prayer together. I imagine most of us wouldn't have thought of the National Gallery as somewhere to naturally go and pray, it's usually a very active place, but I think we found it very powerful, a moment of stillness and communion with God in the middle of a busy gallery with people walking past all the time.

I looked up the word 'move' in my thesaurus and similar words listed were 'progress' and 'travel'. Which sounds very positive, a progression and a travelling towards something, towards a new experience. Other words listed included 'jump' and 'dance' - what a joyful idea, perhaps something we can do as we leave the church looking as it does now and return to find it looking different. We will need to reclaim it, individually and as a community, make friends with it again, seek out the familiar and investigate the new.

If we are on the move, do we need to travel light and if so what will we leave behind? Do we need to take our clergy robes, hymn books, altar, communion silver? Or do we devise another sort of worship adapted to a transitory phase in the life of St Martins. And perhaps we need to leave behind some things emotionally – some of our habits and ideas which haven't been challenged for a while. Even if we decide to keep them, this may be the time to examine them.

I've been working on setting up a St Martin's photo archive and was very struck by a picture I found of St Clements church after it had been bombed during the second World War. There was no roof, only parts of the walls, the ground was uneven and damaged and yet a service was held there afterwards. I wondered why - was it the strong need to worship, as a gesture of defiance towards the bombers, or a morale boosting exercise? I imagine it was also a desire to reclaim a much loved building for its original purpose as we will reclaim this building for ourselves.

These are my reflections on community on the move and I haven't come to any conclusions, in true St Martin's fashion I've asked more questions than I've answered. Perhaps it's reassuring to know that some things don't change!