

Sunday 10 May 2009: Fifth Sunday of Easter

Belonging and bearing fruit

Readings: Acts 8.26-40; John 15.1-8

At the Annual Parochial Church Meeting two weeks ago, when we had got through the formal business of electing Churchwardens and PCC, receiving the accounts and reviewing activities, we started to look forward. Now that we are coming out of the building renewal project we are growing in number and activity. Even in the 10am congregation it is no longer possible for anyone to know everyone else.

If that is true of the regular congregation, it is even more true of the wider St Martin's community. Ashley, Tillie's mother became part of St Martin's by working in the Campaign Team, raising the money for the project. Actually, the whole family is in it up to their necks with us because Tillie's grandfather is the Chairman of our Buildings Renewal company, working in partnership with Ian Henderson, the Chairman of the Development Trust. We couldn't have done it without them.

My back of the envelope calculations reckon that about 7,000 people have been directly involved in the buildings project and about 700,000 come through St Martin's in the course of a year. They don't all come to church services or even to pray. We are a sustainable mix of church, charity and commerce. Homeless people often rest in church and come to The Connection at St Martin's. Chinese people come to the Bishop Ho Ming Wah Centre. My predecessor, Geoffrey Brown, extended the ministry of St Martin's in commercial terms. We are one of London's major concert venues and the Café in the Crypt is a great place to meet friends and to eat reasonably priced, good quality food. We have sometimes wondered if the mission statement should be, 'Feeding people body and soul'.

The two parishes of which I have been Vicar are at either end of the spectrum in London Diocese. On the Isle of Dogs in East London, not literally an island but bounded by the loop in the River Thames and the West India Docks, 98% of the church's Electoral Roll lived in the parish. Here, hardly any of you do. This is a church in which it seems pretty normal for Ziggy Wooldridge and Viv Castro to fly in from Nairobi to get married next Saturday. Ziggy has been part of St Martin's all his life, and Viv Castro is an American Costa Rican.

In the current climate it feels a bit risky to borrow a slogan from a bank, but we had mission statements first and St Martin's is "the world's local church". In this sort of open community how do we belong? Is it just a matter of turning up when we want and consuming what is on offer? Well that's one way, and it undoubtedly allows people to feel part of this place and what goes on here, but the mission of the church is to turn consumers of religion into disciples of Jesus Christ.

Sometimes we regulars long to be a tighter, closer group. The short period two years ago when we closed the church for 5 months and became St Martin's on Tour was really good for developing the core congregation. We didn't have to bother with many visitors: they couldn't find us! Now we are back and busier than ever and there's tremendous excitement and energy at St Martin's. And in such an open, diverse, multi-layered church, we are bound to ask questions about how we belong to one another and to Christ?

There are three sorts of answers.

Institutional answers are the simplest. We belong by baptism. Today Matilda Clifton becomes a member of Christ's church. It is how we all became members of the church, and if you are visiting St Martin's, when Richard explains about the distribution of Communion, he will invite those of you are baptised and normally receive Communion in your own church to do so with us here today because to belong anywhere is to belong everywhere. You help us to be part of the wider, and not just Anglican, Church and at the door after the service I often say take our greetings to your home church.

The institutional is necessary but it isn't always helpful. When I was staying with Roman Catholic Benedictines at St John's in Minnesota they suggested I didn't ask them about receiving Communion. They do what they do in Rome. If anyone goes to Communion the Pope gives Communion to the person who has presented themselves faithfully at the altar rail. He does not ask, "Are you an Anglican?" So the monks told me some questions are better not asked and that's because institutions are always limited even when they serve a bigger purpose.

A Biblical answer about who belongs is given by today's reading from Acts, the baptism of the Ethiopian eunuch. To us he seems so strange a figure that it's hard to hear this is one of the great missionary stories of the Bible. In Israelite law, eunuchs were excluded from the assembly of the Lord. They were outcasts because they had mutilated themselves, or more likely had been mutilated by others more powerful, and there was no going back. So the incident in Acts is a revolution on the wilderness road fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah that the outcasts will be gathered in by the Messiah. The limits to baptism are not social or physical but all who believe are welcome. That includes some pretty strange people, whom we are unlikely to meet in other contexts, but who show us the width and depth of God's love.

The Gospel provides a third sort of answer about who belongs, which is a functional or practical answer. At one level we don't have to do anything, just to be: Jesus said, "Abide in my love". At another, the proof of who belongs in Christ is in their fruitfulness. I love the passage from 1 John 4, the third reading for set for today which we don't use, that "God is love and those who live in love live in God". He might almost have added, whether they know it or not. I also love the saying from the second century Irenaus that "The glory of God is a person fully alive".

Abide in God, abide in Christ, they are one and the same. Best not to get too hung up on the institutional, and to resist those readings of the Bible that limit and exclude who might be welcome in God's kingdom. In this context of church, welcome to all who are fruitful and all who want to be fruitful. What baptism points to is that all have the potential to abide in God and be fruitful. This is exactly what the Biblical texts point to in today's anthem, John Ireland's 'Many waters cannot quench love'. They all reflect on Baptism, especially the verses from 1 Peter which are directly addressed to those to be baptised: "Ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, that ye should show forth the praises of him who has brought you out of darkness into his marvellous light".