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Friday 2 October 2020

Matthew 28:16-20

Reflection

On Monday of this week I read a blog post in which the writer identifies four attitudes common to those organisations which are not only surviving the current crisis but which are best prepared to thrive in it and beyond it.

These “attitudes” might be found in any kind of business or organization, but it seems to me glaringly obvious that they can - and should - apply to churches, not least this Church, our Church.

The first two I will simply mention in the passing; important as they are, it's the other two that require our greater focus.

The first “attitude” is summed up thus: **‘We are not waiting for things to return to normal.’**

Well I hope not because it will be a long wait. And if we're honest, much of what was our “normal” hadn't been working anyway! You can't look at sixty years of decline and think, ‘I can't wait to get back to normal.’ You can't consider the catastrophic loss of children and young people from our congregations and say, ‘We can't wait to get back to normal, the way it was before all of this.’

Wanting to go back to normal would be like emigrating then returning to your hometown fifty years later and being surprised that it wasn't the same person behind the counter in the corner shop. He or she is no longer there. Come to that; neither is the corner shop, the library, the post office or the bank.

Cher sang, ‘If I could turn back time...’ but she couldn't and neither can we - tho at least she could sing!

The second “attitude” exhibited by thriving organisations goes like this: **“Major change is inevitable; we will embrace it.”**

Change is what happens when you’re not looking - or when you’re so caught up in yourself that you’re unaware of what’s going on around you. Change just “is.” But there’s a country mile of difference between reluctantly submitting to it and willingly embracing it.

Thriving organisations - thriving churches - are those that have moved past considering whether or not they like these major changes and have, instead, recognised them, adapted to them, and got on with it, with some determination and, yes, even with enthusiasm.

But now the third of these “attitudes” which is described this way – **“We will be more outwardly-focussed than ever.”**

Now here - in bucketloads - is the relevance for the Church.

To be outwardly-focussed means, in our language, to be focussed on mission rather than maintenance.

It’s understanding that the same Jesus who calls us to Him sends us out for Him. The Jesus who says, ‘Follow me’ goes on to say ‘Now go and make disciples... be fishers of people as I have shown you.’

It’s understanding that if we succumb in any way to trying to save our life, we will surely lose it and therefore it’s a commitment to giving our life away. That is the attitude of being more outwardly-focussed than ever.

But what does that look like in practice?

Missional, outward-focus, is saying and doing, doing and saying - refusing to separate these two, knowing full well that the one demands the other, as the “heads” of the coin can hardly exist without the “tails.”

The doing?

It’s working for justice and peace, it’s sitting silently with the bereaved and the broken, it’s welcoming the “tired, the poor, the huddled masses, the wretched refuse, the homeless, the tempest-tossed.” It’s taking climate justice seriously. It’s refusing to brush aside racial injustice as “not our problem.” It’s all that we do because we care, because we’re moved,

because we mean it when we pray 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.' It's what we do because we have glimpsed something of the Kingdom.

So mission, being outwardly-focussed, is engaging, doing, working.

And it's saying. Sharing, proclaiming, speaking a word in season, always being ready to give an explanation for the hope that is within us. It's pioneering, finding new ways to express timeless truths. We must find our voice, friends, be ready to articulate this good news. Let's talk about Jesus.

For those ordained it's remembering that we answered 'they are' when we were asked: 'Are not zeal for the glory of God, love to the Lord Jesus Christ, and a desire for the salvation of all people your great motives and chief inducements?'

And yet how are they to believe if they have not heard and how are they to hear if someone doesn't speak?

On Tuesday evening, one of our ministry colleagues, Peter Nimmo, tweeted "I seem to have gained quite a few followers recently..." Happy for you, Peter! The more the merrier! But it made me think this: when the Church gets it right in terms of being missional, it's the King and Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, who gains followers. Recently, has there been enough of that around here?

Doing and speaking, speaking and doing. That's mission. And that's why we're here, why Jesus call us to Him then sends us out for Him.

Friends, much of the business of this General Assembly is concerned with how we organise ourselves - internal structures, the ordering of our finances and so on. We'd be naive to imagine that you can get by without any of that.

But we all know that organising, managing, restructuring are not - must not - be ends in themselves. The internal mechanics count for nothing if they don't lead to us being more outwardly-focussed, more missional.

If we're not speaking of Jesus, out there...

If we're not making real the love of Jesus , out there...

If we're not proclaiming good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, sight to the blind, freedom to the oppressed, out there...

If we're not announcing the Day of the Lord's favour, out there...

...then no amount of tinkering in here will make the slightest bit of difference. I know that. You know that.

So let's do this Assembly. Let's work towards having the Church shaped and organised as efficiently and effectively as possible.

So that it might in turn be fruitful.

That it might be God-glorifying, Jesus-following, Spirit-freeing...

That through it the world might be turned upside down...

That through it love and peace and joy and light and healing and wholeness and grace and reconciliation might flood this land.

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, AMEN.