



Sermon preached at William Temple Parish Church, Wythenshawe

by the Rev'd Canon Howard Eales

Sunday 15th February 2015

The first thing to say this morning is “thank you for your invitation”. It is a delight to be here and I am very grateful to Stephen for inviting me to come and take part in the 50th Anniversary celebrations of this church. His invitation could not have been clearer or more open: “. . . please speak about the community of Wythenshawe, or the great Bishop William Temple, or our magnificent building”. So I've been given plenty of choice.

When I had a first look at the Bible readings that are set for this morning I was immediately struck by how appropriate for the work and outreach of any church are the words we heard from St. John's Gospel: "Some Greeks who had gone to Jerusalem went up to Philip and said: 'Sir, we should like to see Jesus' ".

What better mission statement could you have for a church than “Sir, we should like to see Jesus”? Those words echo the first chapter of John's Gospel, where those who are asking about Jesus are told **twice** simply to “come and see”. And that in its turn is perfectly matched for us by words with which St. Mark and St. Matthew both end their Gospels, when the Risen Lord Jesus instructs his disciples; "Go, therefore, and teach all peoples everywhere" or “Go out into the whole world and proclaim the Good News”

“Sir, we should like to see Jesus”

“Come and see!”

“Go, and tell”

I last preached in this church a little under 20 years ago, on 8th October 1995, and those of you who were present on that occasion and have particularly good memories will have no difficulty in remembering the general gist of what I was saying I reflected on the time that I had spent with you here and my mixed feelings about moving on to new things, and I

ended by looking ahead to this year, 2015, the 50th Anniversary year. I pointed out that even if I were to follow in the steps of the great William Temple and become successively Bishop of Manchester, Archbishop of York and then finally made it to Archbishop of Canterbury I should nevertheless have retired ***just in time*** to leave all the organising to somebody else and history, Stephen, has proved me right!

“Sir, we should like to see Jesus”

“Come and see!”

This church is a fairly obvious local landmark; you can hardly miss it. Its big cross standing prominently outside proclaims silently, at all times and in all weathers, what its purpose is. The equally prominent cross here inside speaks the same message. It is God's house, a house of prayer, a meeting place and a big one at that. It is for people to use in times of joy and sorrow, celebration and contemplation. It welcomes both those who use it every week and those who use it only very occasionally. It can “feel” properly used when a handful meet in the chapel, or when many hundreds are in here on some really big occasion. Those who come here regularly come to find, we hope, spiritual refreshment through worship and sacrament; it is our prayer that those who come as visitors at other times will indeed see something of Jesus. All those who have ***come***, whatever the circumstances, then of course ***go***, and we hope that they may take with them something spiritually special.

“Sir, we should like to see Jesus”

“Come and see!”

“Go, and tell people everywhere the Good News”

Janet and I were here with you in the congregation just 4 weeks ago when Anne was the guest preacher. Hearing her recollections of your trials and tribulations with the roof repairs reminded me of two things. First of all, many of us back in the early 1990's really thought that we had cured the problem when the roof was coated with a special application of some green stuff which was supposed to be waterproof. Clearly, it was not! Then secondly, a question for Stephen (who, I hope, will forgive me for appearing to speak to him out of the back of my neck!). Has anyone ever told you, Vicar, of the time when we had to have the floors dug up in the Vicarage lounge and kitchen? There was something wrong with the hard-core floor material, and it was dug out to a depth of 3 to 4 feet; we have photos somewhere at home of the water at the bottom of the hole! So, as we say in the Church of England, “by kind permission of the Churchwardens”, Janet, Sarah, Elizabeth and I cooked in the church kitchen, and one of you sitting here even lent us your microwave, which I put on my desk in the study!

But Stephen's invitation was to celebrate the community of Wythenshawe, or the great Bishop William Temple, or this magnificent building consecrated 50 years ago in 1965. Leaving aside the long-running problems with curing the roof of its many leaks, my only

problem with the building was how George Pace, the architect all those years ago, designed the way in which the east facing sloping roof met the flat roofs over the vestries at the front of the church. His design at that point has one serious shortcoming; it resembles a ski-slope yes, a ski-slope. In wintry conditions it is an ideal place to climb up for a slide, or even try out your sledge. One snowy winter's day I was at my desk in the Vicarage study through there and gradually became aware of a sort of rumbling noise. I stepped through here into the empty church to investigate and it didn't take long to realise what was going on; I let myself out through the church kitchen door and sure enough – two lads had climbed up onto the roof in spite of the anti-vandal paint. There they were, tobogganing down the snow-covered roof. I told them in no uncertain terms to come down, only too aware that if either of them had fallen off the high side of the pitched roof the Health & Safety people would probably have held us responsible! But the final straw was to hear the **language** from one of them as he slithered back down the anti-vandal paint on the drainpipe near the door. You'd never guess what he called me; no obscenities, nothing foul-mouthed. Do you know, Vicar, for the first and only time in my entire ministry I was accused of being a Bible-basher! Me? A Bible-basher?

You don't have to be a Bible-basher to realise how appropriate for the work and outreach of any church are those words that we've heard this morning from St. John's Gospel: “Sir, we should like to see Jesus”. What better mission statement could a church have than “Come and see!” This magnificent church is a prominent local landmark, with its big cross outside for all to see. Over its 50 year lifetime so far many groups of architectural students, curates new to ministry and ordinands in training have been shown around this building. Those who pass by and have eyes to see may take note of what that cross is saying, silently, at all times and in all weathers.

It happens that today, the 5th Sunday of Lent, is often referred to as Passion Sunday, not passion in terms of human affections but coming from the Latin word “passio”, meaning “to suffer”. Music-lovers will be familiar with Bach's musical works entitled the “St. Matthew Passion” and the “St. John Passion”. The closest that we get to it in English is the word “compassion”; taken literally that means “to suffer with, to suffer alongside”. To be compassionate means to stand alongside someone, to support them, to be sympathetic, and Christian folk are called upon to stand alongside or “suffer with” others when they are needed. That is part of the Christian calling.

This morning's reading from St. John's Gospel is a striking example of just how different his Gospel is from the other three, Matthew, Mark and Luke. John has none of the short, pithy occasional sayings in his Gospel; instead a number of what we might call carefully composed speeches. None of the very realistic encounters of Jesus with various groups or individuals along the way; instead a number of rather artificial conversations, more like carefully prepared dialogues. None of the richly varied parables; instead a few wonderful sections like “I am the Good Shepherd – I am the True Vine – I am the Resurrection and the Life”, totally different in style. And in St. John there is none of the hope of a **future** coming of Jesus at the end of time; instead the theme of Christ's **present** coming to live **in** the Church and **through** the power of the Holy Spirit. Which brings us - almost - to Easter.

Today is Passion Sunday, so we are by no means at Easter yet; as that prominent cross outside and this one here in front of us both remind us, you can't have Easter without Passiontide and Holy Week. However much you try to tease out, or try to grasp, what happened at that first Easter, something extraordinary happened to transform the disciples, a fairly small group of demoralised and dejected failures, into a re-energised fellowship which went on to produce the Church of the New Testament. So yes, this building, designed by George Pace and consecrated 50 years ago now, *is* a magnificent church, but it is still **only** a building - the message of Easter is that, among other things, miraculously **WE** are the Church, the Body of Christ.

Thanks be to God.