

## Lent Sermons 2016

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent, 21<sup>st</sup> February 2016

St Mary's Kidlington, 10.00am

The Rt Revd Humphrey Southern, Principal of Cuddesdon Theological College, on  
**Why come to Church?**

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Two snippets of Scripture and one important question:

First, from the New Testament reading chosen for this morning for St Mary's, a choice that coincides with the 'Pilgrim' course your Lent Groups are following, which focus this week on the Eucharist, from St Paul's first letter to the Corinthians: *'... as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.'*

And second, from the Gospel reading set in the Lectionary for today, the second Sunday of Lent, from St Luke's Gospel: *'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.'*

*'Every time you eat and drink this bread and this cup you proclaim the Lord's death'* and *'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'* – two sentences of Scripture to lodge in our minds. And now a question, maybe a surprising – even shocking – question. It is this: Why did you come to Church this morning? What brought you here?

Maybe you do not find this question difficult to answer: habit, friendships, a desire to learn, a need to commune with God... the rumour that there was a classy visiting preacher (!) (or perhaps this news had not reached you, and you are contemplating the awful reality even as I speak!). Perhaps your answers to the question – What brought you here? For what did you come? – will include elements of all these possibilities, and there may be more: curiosity... to hear your banns called... to get out of the wind ... 'not quite sure, really' ...

Any or all of these, and a whole lot more, may be answers to the question and none of them is *wrong*: there is no 'correct' or 'incorrect' answer to the question. It's really not much more than an interesting speculation, really. I have a much, much more important question to put to you in a moment – but this may be worth pondering for a second or two as we pass.

Interesting speculation though it may be, it is worth noting the St Paul knows *exactly* what the answer to the question is. He knows precisely what we are here for, why we have come and what our purpose is. We have already heard his answer in the first of those snippets of Scripture: *'... as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes.'*

*This* is what we are here to do: to eat bread and to share wine and by so doing to proclaim Jesus' death and look forward to his coming. Every act of worship – especially every Eucharist – proclaims Jesus' death and resurrection and looks forward to his return in glory and judgement. If these things are not in the forefront of our mind when we gather, we are in serious danger of missing the whole point!

*'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'* – our second sentence from today's readings – has entered the very liturgy of the Eucharist. We say (or sing) it immediately after praying that bread and wine may be for us the body and blood of the one whose death we proclaim, whose life we celebrate and whose coming we look forward to.

For St Paul, writing to the Christians of Corinth, the message was entirely simple: you come to Church, you break bread and share wine, to greet the Lord Jesus Christ who comes, proclaiming his death and acknowledging his lordship. *That's* the purpose, Everything else – spiritual uplift, learning and teaching, encouragement and challenge, friends, neighbours, comfort, fellowship – *everything* else (good as these things may be) is secondary to that primary purpose: to proclaim, to acknowledge, to look forward.

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Now, I promised you a second question, far, far more important than the first, and here it comes. If the first question was 'Why are you here?' the second is this, 'What difference would it make if you were not here?'

I need to be very clear what it is that I am (and am not) asking here. I am *not* asking what difference it would make to you – to each of us – if we were not here, if St Mary's had simply not opened its doors this morning. There may be some interest in that question, but not much (frankly). How would we fill our Sunday mornings? No, the far, far more important question is: 'What difference would it make to *them out there* – the people of Kidlington, the folk who never come and maybe never will, the people eating breakfast or reading the paper or playing football or washing the car or doing the shopping, or whatever – what difference would it make *to them* if *we* were not here proclaiming death and resurrection and looking forward to glory?'

That is the question and that is the challenge that I want to pose for us this morning. Because it is essential to what the Eucharist – this Eucharist and every Eucharist, indeed all worship – is all about. In fact it is essential to the fundamental question of what Church is all about. What this Church – every Church – needs always to ask itself (as I am sure you do) is 'what difference does our existence and worship and activity make to the community in which we are set?' If we could not answer that question – or if we felt that the answer was 'not much, really' – then that would be pretty worrying!

If this act of worship, our prayers and hymns, our piety and our keeping of Lent, does not relate strongly and directly to the world out there – to Kidlington and its concerns, to the shoppers and the football players, to the refugees and the asylum seekers, to the politicians arguing about Europe and the media reporting on it, to the rich, the poor and the in between, to the concerned, the unconcerned and the overlooked – then there is (there would be) a real danger of it's being empty and pointless.

And that is why what we are doing here this morning is so risky! The one who comes in the name of the Lord comes in judgement and in promise. This world of ours (and those out there) is his, and it is his death in and for this world that we proclaim. If we miss this point – if our action here has no impact on the world out there for which it is given – then we are in a sorry state, indeed.

A couple of verses on from where our New Testament reading ended St Paul says this to the Christians of Corinth (but he could just as well have been talking to the Christians of Kidlington or Cuddesdon or anywhere else), *'all who eat and drink without discerning the body eat and drink judgement against themselves'*. His primary focus was on the 'body' of Christians, but the implication goes much further: God's love in Christ Jesus and God's sacrifice in Christ Jesus – the very reality this Eucharist recalls and rehearses and makes real amongst us – is love and sacrifice for the world, the whole world in all its variety and glory, its complexity and mess. When we break bread and share wine we do so in this world (not removed from it) and for this world, with this world on our hearts and in the forefront of our attention. Or else we eat and drink judgement on ourselves.

*'Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord'*. We, who in a few short moments, will receive him in our hands and on our lips, are to take him out into the world that is already his. And there we will find – astonishingly and gloriously – that he is already there before us in those we meet and interact with.

Worship, in other words, is not confined to here and now. Still less is it about nostalgic celebration of that which has gone before. It is for out there and tomorrow, and the next day, and for ever. Amen.