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Readers' Service

What sort of Church?

by

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Number: 5

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WHAT SORT OF CHURCH?

ORDER OF SERVICE

CALL TO WORSHIP:

This is the day that the Lord has made, and this is the day that he has given us as a day of worship. Let us rejoice and be glad in it. May the Lord open our lips, so that our mouths may proclaim his praise.

HYMN NO: 16 (H&P) - 'Praise to the Lord, the Almighty, the King of creation'

LET US PRAY:

We believe, O God, that you are the eternal God of life;
We believe, O God, that you are the eternal God of love;
You have brought us, O God, to the joyful light of this day and this new week. Help us to leave yesterday behind, and not to covet tomorrow. Help us, we pray, to worship you now, in spirit and in truth.

(Silence)

Eternal God, God of amazing love, seen in your Son, brought near by your Spirit, take from us, we pray, what we need carry no longer, our burdens of sin and failure and shame. Have mercy upon us, so that we may be free again to serve you and to love one another.

(Silence)

God of grace, we believe that your love forgives and your strength sets free, so now in our worship we offer you our thanks and our praise, in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

FIRST LESSON: Acts 20:17-36

HYMN NO: 798 (H&P) - 'O Loving Lord'

NOTICES AND OFFERTORY:

PRAYERS OF DEDICATION:

Lord God, grant that our gifts may be used in the service of your kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*

SECOND LESSON: Matthew 10:16-22

HYMN NO: 708 (H&P) - 'Believe not those who say'

SERMON (SEE ATTACHED SHEETS)

HYMN NO: 804 (H&P) - 'The Church of Christ'

LET US PRAY:

Generous God, we give thanks for your goodness to us, known and unknown: for the world with its beauty and mystery, for our lives with their promise and past, for our loved ones and friends whose company means so much to us. Above all, we give thanks for Jesus Christ: for his love for the outcast and stranger, for his care for those troubled in body or mind, for his death on the cross and his resurrection, for the gift of his Holy Spirit. May we continue to show our gratitude to you in the way we live and give glory to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God blessed and glorious for ever and ever.

Generous God, we pray for your Church in this land, in all its denominations and in every congregation; that we may be strengthened in our knowledge and understanding of your truth. By our words and deeds may we continue to proclaim your love with joy and generosity of spirit, that the world may be led to know you.

Generous God, we pray for the world, for peace where there is strife, for comfort where there is suffering, and unity where there is discord. Strengthen by your Spirit, all who work for the good of others through education, relief agencies and governments.

Generous God, we pray for our country, our Queen, and her Government; for those in authority and those with influence; that working for the common good, they may serve the whole community with wisdom, integrity and compassion.

Generous God, we pray for those in sorrow, those who are in trouble, for those who suffer cruelty, injustice or neglect. In their weakness may they share your strength, and in their despair find hope.

Finally, Generous God, in the quietness of trust in you we pray for ourselves and for one another.

(Silence)

THE LORD'S PRAYER

HYMN NO: 653 (H&P) - 'God is here'

BLESSING

So may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God, and of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be among us and remain with us all, now and always.

Amen

SERMON

What sort of Church?

1. What sort of Church do we want? What sort of Church should we be? What sort of Church does God want and the world need? Those are the questions in this sermon.

I don't know whether you ever noticed it or not, but before we went over to the new Lectionary of Bible readings there used to be three weeks on the trot, ending on the first Sunday in September which marks the beginning of the new Methodist year, when the themes of the services were all asking those questions, what sort of Church should we be? What does it mean to be the Church? In the first week we thought about the Church as the Serving Community, in the second the Church as the Witnessing Community and in the last one there was the odd-sounding theme of the Church as the Suffering Community. Those three sets of readings added up to saying that if we ask what sort of Church do we want, the answer is a Church which serves, witnesses and suffers.

2. We read in our Acts lesson today of how St Paul, travelling up to Jerusalem on what he knew would be a highly dangerous mission, invites the Church leaders from Ephesus to meet him while his ship put in nearby. We read Luke's version of Paul's final speech to them. In that speech he said two things, he reminded them of the rough passage he and they had had in Ephesus in the past, and then he spoke of the rough passage he expected as he went on his way. But he ended on a very odd note, he quotes an otherwise unknown saying of Jesus, that "It is more blessed to give than receive" [Acts 20:35]. And that is text for this sermon. What does that otherwise unknown saying of Jesus have to say to us when we ask questions like, What sort of Church do we want? What sort of Church should we be? What sort of Church does God want and the world need?. Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive".

3. This saying sounds a very simple one, and it's often trivialised and we hear it said about things like giving and receiving presents: but it's about much more important things than that. It is about the happiness or blessedness of giving one's life away in the service of others. It makes the bold statement that giving yourself away in the service of others, hard and painful though that can be, is actually much more satisfying than a life of ease receiving all of life's goodies. It is not as pleasant: but it is much more satisfying. That is what Paul was saying to those Ephesian church leaders, and he knew and they knew about the sacrifices involved in being a Christian, and about the blessings which they had all known when self was put last and God and others first. So Paul testified to his own experience, that "it is more blessed to give than receive". That is a simple statement of a traditional Christian value, that life is about giving yourself away in the service of others, about sacrifice and service and duty and responsibility, about "none of self and all of thee": but there are at least two groups of people around today who say that this simple saying is nonsense.

4. The first group of people who would say that it is silly to think that "it is more blessed to give than receive", or even that it is dangerous, are those people all round us who belong to the "Me Generation." They have been told through the 1980's and since that life is all about personal fulfilment: first it was economic fulfilment, owning

your own house and shares and whatnot, then after that got risky it was fulfilment in health, fitness, vitality and personal wellbeing. And with all of that was the insistence on one's rights, above all one's rights to be or do or have whatever one wanted to be or do or have. So the women's magazines and the Sunday supplements, which are always very good guides to what are the real values in society, are full of articles about fulfilment in your marriage, or your garden, or your personality. It has even got into the Church, where ministers on the move look for appointments in which they will find fulfilment. But there is not a single saying of Jesus in which he says we have a right to be fulfilled. And St Paul's words on the quayside cut right across such ideas. You only find fulfilment, he says, when the "Me" part is out of the way. He reminds the Ephesians and us of that saying of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than receive".

5. But the second group of people who find this idea impossible are firmly inside the Church. There is the sort of popular evangelism of the "Come to Jesus and all will be well" type, which entices people with promises of satisfaction, success and personal fulfilment. And there is the new and American prosperity theology, that God will bless you with material things if you give to his work. This all turns Jesus' Parable of the Two Roads on its head, and offers the Christian Way as a broad, easy and happy way. Jesus never said that. What he did say was that the Christian way was a narrow, hard and uphill way, and we read in our second lesson about what some Christians might expect to suffer and which many have.

6. Jesus said and Paul reminded the Ephesians that he had said, "It is more blessed to give than receive". For Paul and for Jesus, the Church is the people of Christ who put others first, and give themselves away in the service of others. Doing that can be painful and hard, as Paul knew and as many know today. And that's where our second reading comes in again. Matthew 10:16-22 is an odd reading, a series of warnings from Jesus about the difficulties the disciples would face, and how they needed to "endure". Self-giving service can take many forms: it might involve voluntary work, or it might be choosing a particular career or vocation; but it all demands endurance because it can result in misunderstanding and abuse, and it is costly in terms of time and effort. But it is the conviction of the New Testament that this is how life is to be lived - towards others rather than towards self.

7. So Jesus said, "It is more blessed to give than receive". He was talking about people giving themselves away in the service of others, and that is what the old Lectionary meant when it called the Church the "suffering" community. These words of our Lord call us to be a group of people who are prepared to do just that, to give ourselves away in the service of others, to put ourselves second in all kinds of ways, to deny ourselves, to put ourselves out. Taking these words seriously means that the Church is a group of people who do not believe that personal satisfaction and fulfilment is their right. Instead, following Jesus, they are prepared to sacrifice and to suffer for the good of other people. Of course we don't always do it very well, and we can be as self-centred as anyone else; and of course there are those outside of the Church whose sacrificial living and concern for others puts us to shame: that's why we have prayers of confession in our services. But if we are true to our deepest selves we know the truth of the words of those two hymns, "It is the way the Master went, should not the servant tread it still?" and "Solid joys, and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know."

8. So, what sort of Church do we want? What sort of Church should we be? What sort of Church does God want and the world need? St Paul told the Ephesian church leaders, "We should keep in mind the words of the Lord Jesus, who himself said, 'Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving!'" On that basis the Church is the Suffering Community - not in the sense of being miserable or being masochistic, but in the sense of being a people prepared to put themselves out in service of others - to deny themselves and even sacrifice themselves for others. In so doing there is a cost, and there may well be pain - but there is also true blessing, deep life-satisfaction. For as our Lord Jesus said, "Happiness lies more in giving than in receiving."

Amen.