

“Therefore, my beloved sisters and brothers, be firm, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labour in the Lord is not empty.” 1 Cor. 15: 58

Dear Friends,

Last week I wrote about how our future hope of resurrection in Christ encourages us to work for the transformation of our world here and now. My thoughts were based on the first half of 1 Corinthians 15. It was the passage with which many of our Circuit Churches have started the final section of our theme preaching for this year looking at what it means to be *“in Christ”*.

In this final part of the series we are reflecting upon our *“hope in Christ.”* The quotation above is taken from the second half of 1 Cor. 15, the passage set for this Sunday in our theme preaching. The verse is the last in chapter 15. Paul has written about how death has been defeated through Christ and how our perishable bodies will be raised imperishable. It is a passage which is largely about our future hope and yet its final verse is firmly rooted in continuing to live out our faith as we work for the Lord here and now. And then Paul goes on in Chapter 16 to get really practical and down to earth as he encourages the believers in Corinth to put aside each week an amount of money for an offering which would then be taken to Jerusalem to support their fellow believers suffering from famine, poverty and persecution.

I have had a question in my mind over the last few days; a simple but vital question for us as believers today: *“What is the church for?”* What is our mission in the here and now as we work for the transformation of this world, even during this time of global pandemic?

Of course, the question *“what is the church for?”* is a question not just for our church councils or national conference. It is a question for each one of us because another way of asking it is *“what is your faith for?”* What is the purpose of your faith? Is it to get you into heaven when you die? I think that is how many people in our world view it. And of course, eternal life is part of the answer, but it cannot be the whole answer.

The Apostle James wrote: *“What do you profit my sisters and brothers if anyone of you says, ‘I have faith’ but then does not show its outworking? Can that faith save you? If a brother or sister has no clothes or daily food and anyone of you says to them ‘Go in peace, keep warm and well-fed’ but you do not then give them what is necessary for their body,’ how does anyone profit from that? So indeed, faith if it is not worked out, is dead.”* (James 2: 14 – 17)

It is the same message as Jesus’ own parable of the sheep and goats when he said, *“And the king will answer them saying: ‘Truly I tell you inasmuch as you did to one of these, the least of my brothers and sisters, you did to me.’* What I read from this is that my place in heaven is less based on my faith in Jesus and more based on how that faith in Jesus is worked out in practical love, compassion and support for *“the least of these.”* Jesus lists *“the least of these”* as those who are hungry, thirsty, strangers, those without enough money to buy clothes, the sick and those in prison. Not often our usual clientele in church!

Whether it is taking a weekly offering for those suffering in Jerusalem or working faith out in other practical compassionate ways, that is what the Church is for. We may think it is more about worship, prayer, Bible study, church meetings or church buildings. And perhaps that is why the Church in this country is in the state that it is, teetering on the edge of oblivion. Worship, prayer, Bible Study, church meetings and church buildings are not unimportant. But neither are they all important. They are simply the means through which God chooses to equip us for what is really our mission – to transform this world through acts of love, grace, compassion, and self-sacrifice. Our worship reminds us of the character and work of God Father, Son and Holy Spirit and helps us to connect with that Divine Life. Prayer is how we open ourselves up to the power, presence, and guidance of God in

our daily lives and how we bring this world to God for God's blessing. Bible Study gives us a deeper understanding of the character of God and the calling that God has given to us. Our church meetings are meant to be ways to share in conversation and discernment about the specific tasks God is calling us to. And the least important of these things is our church buildings. They are simply gathering places where some of our worship, prayer, study, meetings, and acts of hospitality can be based from and carried out. But the point of each and all of them is to equip the saints of God for works of service and mission to our communities.

When viewed through that lens, I wonder, what percentage of our time, energy and resources are spent on the means compared to the goal of our faith? Maybe Covid 19 can teach us something about that and about our priorities. What is your church doing, what are you doing, to work out your faith in practical daily Christian living? How are you and we working for the transformation of our communities? How might we do so as we begin to look towards moving out of our current restrictions? How can your church better use its resources of people, money, and buildings to care for *"the least of these"*?

If you are concerned to get back to your church building to pray or worship, or meet for fellowship or study without having the question "how will this help me to make a difference for God?" at the very forefront of your mind, then I am not sure you have quite grasped the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, who came to *"seek and to save the lost."*

"What is the Church for?" To be the Body of Christ on earth, engaging in the mission of Christ on earth, which is the transformation and renewal of all things, through the Spirit of Christ at work in our hearts and minds.

With every blessing,

Rev Tim Perkins

Notices

Re-opening of Churches

In the last week, the Government has announced that Churches can now open for private, individual prayer. This is in addition to previous guidance on the limited number of reasons why a church building might be open, such as hosting food banks, night shelters or pre-schools. Churches are not yet allowed to open for public worship.

However, just because we can open our buildings for private prayer does not mean that we must or even that we should. The decision is down to each local church council, but the guidance of the Methodist Connexion is not to rush into it. If a Church Council does decide to open its premises for private prayer there is a whole range of guidance that must be followed including risk assessments and detailed procedures for safely re-opening buildings. This guidance has been forwarded to all Circuit Ministers and local church senior stewards or property stewards. Please be assured that as we move to a time when hopefully the restrictions placed upon us are gradually lifted, we shall be doing so with the clear intention of making sure that our buildings are as safe as possible for people to enter. In the meantime, we continue to be the Church without walls!

We are anticipating that the Government will allow churches to open for public worship from July 4th, but again, it will be down to Church Councils to decide how, when and why they do so, taking into account the needs of their congregations and communities and the cost implications of ensuring high standards of cleanliness and hygiene. It is perhaps more realistic for us to be working towards corporate worship re-starting in September, subject to Government and Methodist Church approval. We continue to regularly update the circuit website with resources for worship at home. You can find those resources at: www.wandamethodists.org.uk