

Faith Acts

Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23; James 2:1-10, 14-17

On Friday I came down to Church to meet up with a few people and marvelled at how – after the difficult months we have been through – and recognising the difficult months that lie ahead – the signs of hope were there to be seen. The preparations for Sunday were being made. The printing and the cleaning. The putting out of chairs, the arranging of flowers – our first real flowers in the church for over a year. And voices. Wherever I went in the building I could hear people talking, laughing, finding out how the others had been.

I know not only on Friday but throughout the weeks that have led up to today people have been working away quietly, steadily, faithfully, to help the Church in the process of emerging. Not a going back to what we were, but a moving forward to what we might become.

At a meeting I attended last week one of our members spoke eloquently about using this time well, and about thinking long and hard about what we should be doing, as well as could be doing when it comes to how we communicate what we believe and why we believe

It's usually the Springtime that we associate with things emerging and coming to light. But for us, and for many, the time of new growth, please God, is now. I know it's still uncertain. I know many people are afraid, or anxious. But with faith, I wonder if God is inviting us to step outside once more, and into the ways and places that we have missed, and to be the people of steadiness and hopefulness and faithfulness that God has made us to be, and the world needs us to be.

The future of the church will not simply be a replication of the past and it is time for vital, new expressions of just and generous Christian faith to emerge.

What might that look like for us, for you, for me?

A deep thirst for a more authentic, honest and sustaining spiritual life.

A compelling hunger to do justice, to show compassion, to walk humbly with God.

A powerful desire to understand and engage with the critical problems of our world.

A profound need for space to grapple honestly with our questions of theology and practice.

An impatient readiness to move beyond narratives of decline to narratives of hope and empowerment.

A growling loneliness for a sense of shared identity and belonging that transcend the locked-down, closed-up, inward looking experience that Covid has brought to all of us.

At the heart of what it must surely mean for us to be Christian, whether we are tackling Climate change or adding our name to the flower rota, whether we are bringing a sense of safety and hope to people living with dementia, or volunteering for the coffee rota, at the heart of what it means to be Christian lies the principle of active compassion which call us to treat all others as we wish to be treated ourselves.

Compassion impels us to work tirelessly wherever we can in big ways or small ways to alleviate the suffering of our fellow human beings, treating everyone without exception with absolute justice, equality and respect. Active compassion is essential to human relationship and to a fulfilled humanity. It is going to be indispensable to us as a congregation, as well as to the wider church, as we seek to create and recreate a place of welcome, fairness, innovation and community in this place and for our parish.

The emphasis on compassion echoes Jesus great commandment to love God with all our heart, mind and strength, and to love our neighbour as ourselves.

It also echoes what James writes about in his letter, who challenges us not to choose between faith and works, between believing and doing, but to holding the two together as we rebuild and reform our church. There's no point in having faith if you don't put it into practice. There's no point in working your socks off if you don't know why you're doing it.

For the Christian, our believing goes hand in hand with our doing. It is what inspires us and motivates us.

Now, after the year and more that we have had, you may feel a little low on inspiration and motivation. But again and again, tired or not, we are brought back, by the letter writer of James and others, to the 'royal law' of Scripture, to love our neighbour as ourselves.

It is the essence of our faith. It is essential because it takes us gently, sometimes forcibly, and makes us look again at the world in which we live and the communities where we make our

homes, and the church which with all its faults and failings, still is the place that brings us together and makes us beyond ourselves. Giving us hopefulness, and opportunity, and friendship, and Jesus.

Twice in our reading James asks the question, ‘What good is it’ – to have faith without works, or merely to tell someone to keep warm, or hope they get enough to eat, and do nothing about it. Faith without works is dead and will not save us. Just as works without faith will wear us out and grind us down. We need both, to help us to keep questioning why the world is the way it is, and to keep deciding to do our bit, great or small, to make it different.

Faith acts – in the fight against hunger and homelessness. Faith acts – in the fight against racism and sectarianism. Faith acts – in the fight to keep our politicians and our business people honest and charitable. Faith acts – when people see no point in the church until an audit is done on the countless acts of kindness and love and generosity and gentleness and joy that we perform because we are, deep down, inspired by the goodness that Jesus of Nazareth calls us to demonstrate in the way we try to speak, in the way we try to think, and in the way we try to act. We do not get it right all the time. But we do get it right some of the time, and that’s what matters. As we emerge tentatively and anxiously and hopefully from the shadow of these last months – and it has been *such* a shadow – spend time now on your own, or with others, and work out how your faith is going to act as we move forward – together – and with God.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit

Amen