

Mark 9

Mission.

“They went on from there and passed through Galilee. He did not want anyone to know it; for he was teaching his disciples”

God is irrelevant.

Many of you will have heard the phrase ‘God is dead’ which was first coined by the German philosopher Nietzsche in the 1880s and which influenced thinking throughout the 20th century. Now God is not dead. God is merely irrelevant.

In a profoundly secularised society people do not even bother to be atheists now. God is not interesting enough for one to have an opinion about him. This has been termed by scholars of religion as apa-theism – apathetic theism. Most people are not against the church, they just have no idea how it could possibly improve their lives.

Many people with a mission-heart believe that there is a real need for God and Jesus ‘out there’, but that the church does not respond to this need because of its closedness.

The church could do better, they say, and more people would come to faith if only the Church was not so afraid to renew itself.

So the Church ends up leaning back on itself and saying ‘well, people could come to us as long as they adapt to our routines’.

And many churches probably could do better, ours included.

But regardless of how inventively or creatively we wrap it, there are many people who simply do not find the product all that interesting. (more on that in a bit).

Christians are in a minority. And it is only when we are faced with that realization that we begin to ask what it actually means to believe in God, to believe in Jesus and his kingdom. Is it really worth our time and energy when so many others appear to be happy and content without such beliefs.

We will not truly understand secularization until we realise that education of our children is also evangelization. They are living in a foreign city with much more attractive gods.

The church of England continues to pour millions of pounds and increasingly exhausted resources into its mission strategies, but all seemingly without the desired results of mass conversions. In an interview this week, the Archbishop of Canterbury said that it is not us who grow the church, it is God who grows the church. He spoke of the late Archbishop of the Congo who died of covid last year.

Over seeing a diocese with 137 hostile militias and 250,000 refugees at the height of the Ebola pandemic and with no resources at all. When asked how do you manage the archbishop of the Congo replied “I do what God enables me to do, and the rest is his problem”.

In the end there are no missional structures, only missional people.

And Mr Welby says to Clergy and Laity alike this week “we can only do what God enables us to do, and the rest is his problem. So, if you can’t do things, don’t be guilty...”

We shouldn’t idealise those mission-churches who are seeing growth and think that they are impervious to the problems faced by those of us who do not see our churches ‘full’. They too have their set of issues.

We must not see secularization as the enemy ‘out there’. It seeps into the church, into the very foundations of faith, and it may eat away courage, trust and joy unless it is checked by a renewed experience of God’s love and grace.

Fundamental questions to ask ourselves in our drive to be a church for all of Wantage is: Why should the church be ‘relevant’ in the first place, and who sets the criteria for this relevance? We must resist the unfounded notion that if we are as nice as possible we will become attractive to an unsympathetic audience.

Many churches have fallen into the well-meaning trap of seeking the favours of the world, of dumbing down their message and their liturgy, of no longer believing their own sources, of avoiding confrontation and being too eager to be liked and appreciated by an indifferent outside world.

Mission is at its heart about persuasion. When a human believes something they do their utmost to persuade others to believe in it too. Because sharing is deeply human. Everyone evangelizes for something. Apple, Starbucks, Jesus.

[Ref. *new vegan range in Waitrose.*]

People are used to being evangelized. So we need not be afraid of it.

We are all of us are embarking in an adventure of learning to know God’s intentions. In our vulnerability we are opening ourselves up to a deeper sense of God’s grace. We are learning to understand what God might be up to, learning to trust. Learning to receive as well as give.

Now I’m not going to go on, but I would just leave us with a challenge as we come to deliberate our future.

I would like to suggest that during the next season of our corporate life we prayerfully begin to *accept* that who we are, what we do, how we worship, how we engage with our community are all the current incarnations of many years of collective experience. Our traditions have not sprung out of nowhere. They are a gift, a treasure. We can use this time to be taught by Jesus, quietly. Just him and us. We let him equip us for mission and evangelization. We allow him to build us up though resting in our worship, maintaining our prayers and engaging with programmes of study.

In planning our Parish Profile we might make it evident that we humbly rejoice in everything that we are. And that we would like a leader who will work with all that we are, will help us to believe in it SO much that we can do no other than to fearlessly and boldly live it out, in the midst of the secular world.

Because mission at its heart is a participation in the realisation of God's purposes in the world, as these are demonstrated in the ministry of Jesus Christ.

Other Churches meet Jesus in the bible. And that's great. Here, our primary knowing of Jesus, and therefore the participation of God's mission, is through the Sacraments, with that of Holy Communion being at the heart of our every act of worship.

Our mission is simple. It is to bear witness to the gospel of salvation in Jesus Christ at the borderline of where faith meets unbelief.

We will do this in a combination of words and deeds, but it will be the most effective when people see that what we do is authentic in its promotion and comfortable in its belief.

It will be in the celebration of our heritage and traditions, and accepting them as the means that God *can and will* use to make his kingdom known in Wantage that we will grow together in faith, hope and love. So allow Jesus to be your teacher, live out what you learn and let God do the rest.