



As prepared for delivery:

Come Holy Spirit, Come Holy Spirit of God renew our lives to be flames of love. Amen.

What makes a church? Well, obviously; history and tradition, people, money and effort.

Obviously leadership.

Obviously community and engagement with its setting and those who live around.

Obviously moving with the times and cultures.

And Peter says a burning and rejoicing light that comes from being distinct and different, and pointing away from itself to God. From being holy.

How dull that sounds! But only when we get all muddled about what it means. Because right through Christian understanding holiness is radical living that is attractive and captivating, not dullness personified in humourless avoidance of anything that has the merest whiff of joy.

Holiness is a central theme of 1 Peter 2, and in fact of the whole letter of 1 Peter. Without a holy people a church is just a building. At its heart is – “be different because Christ has changed you”.

1 Peter 2 begins with a warning against everything that undermines the unity of the church, and the mutual love, that we are to show one for the other. And listen to these words, because when I hear them, my own heart is convicted and I feel a sense of grief. He tells us to avoid guile, that is clever, political, manoeuvring; malice, envy, slander, insincerity, and abandoning those things is the consequence of loving one another and being born again. All these are relational. In the renewed St. John's will the people be relational, loving one another. If we do not love each other, how can we love God? If we don't love God we are just a club, not a church. Can it be a safe place where people can be themselves whoever they are, but where they can become the best they could be? Can it be a place for this areas to be the best it can be, kaleidoscopic change, sparkling and shape shifting in the wonder of the diversity of this great city?

Believers in Jesus inherit and join in the calling that God gave to Israel to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation., God's own people.

Too often we look for the holy in certain characteristics. But because it's the free gift of God, not just our effort, it means that the marginalised, the weak, the poor, the disabled, the elderly, the children, can all be holy. It comes from welcoming God's effort in us. People with very severe disabilities or very severe learning difficulties can be holy: that's the point of the L'Arche communities, they can be holy people. Any tone can be

holy: its more infectious than COVID, more delightful than any of the delights, true and false of this area.

Holiness is explained by the single marvellous act of God; that He calls us out of darkness into light. God turns nobodies into a nation, gives divine forgiveness to the unforgiven, accepts the unacceptable and changes them. God comes close to the unholy, that's you and me.

Holiness in the Old Testament is hospitality, grace, inclusion: it is not just toleration, putting up with. It's acceptance and change.

Yet holiness is often weaponised - a stick with which to hit people. The decision as to who is holy is often historically given to people in power in the church - Bishops, Archbishops, leaders of the church - to exclude that which is not holy. That power raises questions about inclusion and exclusion. For what makes one person holy and thus included, is not human action. It is divine gift and human response. It is seen in many ways, but always it demands our daily conversion.

The language of holiness, when captured for our use, encourages extremism.

Peter never says that holiness means one must separate oneself from people who are not holy. Because when we do that, we confuse, holiness with purity, and they are not the same thing. Purity ends with us saying that single mothers, or people of different sexual identities are automatically not holy. Holiness is not something over which we have power or control. It is the action of God with which we co-operate in love, not judgement. Purity demands conformity, holiness loves diversity in God's light; it is dancing to a million tunes, each one perfect, each one caught and shared.

The call of the Christian is to live on the very front line of holiness, the risky place where we can reach over the frontier and draw people into the love of Christ. A person is holy, the church is holy, a community is holy, only because Christ is in the middle of it.

In our church history, we find people who say 'put up a wall, keep the unholy separate.' But that is not what Peter says. He says, 'Go out, engage, transform'. We are to declare the wonderful works of God. Jesus's incarnation, and life and death, and resurrection and ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit into an unholy world shows that separation is not the same as holiness.

And so reflect, how do we walk together with those who are alien and exiled? What would our communion, our church around the world, the Christian church look like if everyone was loved as a chosen person of God? What would the world be like?

It would put people at the centre of policy and planning; sacrifice and service at the centre of politics; life and love at the centre of community.

Supremely it would put a holy God in the middle of all that we do and say. It would be a Kingdom of God, a holy place of abundance. It would be the place of dreams made real and the steps towards that are the hard ones of people changing, of communities living, of churches being generous and outward looking, of the practical life of new buildings for a new future. May God bless and strengthen you.

