



In his sermon the Archbishop spoke of "the community of the church" in the light of the Trinity.

The Archbishop is currently on a 10-day visit to China.

Archbishop Justin Welby's sermon at Muen Church, Shanghai, China, Trinity Sunday, 31 May 2015.

1 Peter 3: 8-18a

Thank you so much for the invitation to speak here today. It is a great privilege to be among you.

On Trinity Sunday we are drawn into the presence of God by the Spirit through Jesus, sent by love of the Father. We are drawn inward in order to be sent out to give and bless and be the presence of Jesus. Trinity is community, perfect in love and acceptance and giving out, going out. We are to be like that in the church.

All true, but full of issues about how. How? Peter was writing to churches in what is now Turkey. He writes all about how to live a complicated life with households, with worries and pressures, and how to be the community that God wants us to be, because that community is mainly the means through which He loves us.

So today's sermon is about community in the light of Trinity. That community of the church is above all called to witness and worship. We witness every day by what kind of people we are individually and as a community.

In the New Testament the Greek word for witness and the word for martyr (as in someone who dies for their faith) are the same, *'martyroi'*. As today in many places, for the church of the first centuries, to be a witness to Jesus Christ very often meant death.

But the normality of Christian witness for most Christians in the world is the day-to-day experience of living our lives in ways that reveal to those around that we trust in Jesus Christ and seek to follow Him as His disciples.

Peter was very clear that the heart of witness lay not in aggressive shouting at people or any other form of manipulation or disruption, but in lives that were lived so clearly that people would ask why the Christian lived in such a way and that the Christian would "always be ready to give an explanation for the hope that is within you, but with gentleness and grace".

What are the things that witness most clearly?

In Peter's letter it was a willingness to accept the hardships and challenges of life and still to trust in God as a church united in love for one another. Much of the letter is about the everyday life of ordinary people. It speaks of family relations, of how the household works, of judges who were sometimes fair and sometimes unfair; of ups and downs in life, the worries that most people face.

The letter begins with a chapter setting out the wonderful good news of Jesus Christ, and an explanation of the nature of the church. Peter tells them at the beginning that they have been given something extraordinary - salvation - and that they are a community which now is able to live differently from those around them, filled with hope and assurance of the love of Christ.

Peter accepts that life is unfair and opposition comes (verse 8). No life anywhere is without worries and concerns.

A friend of ours once commented about the struggles of children, that no one is ever happier than the least happy of their children. I am not sure that is completely true, but almost nothing has us awake at night like a child in trouble. The same applies to elderly relatives, and the desire we all have to ensure that they are treated with dignity and respect (3:1-7) and that we are as we grow older.

All of us face one or both of these questions. Yet how will we be able to know the peace of God in the midst of all these pressures?

We begin by recognising that what God has already given us in the salvation Jesus has won for us is infinitely precious, and the God who gives such things will not then turn and betray us. And secondly, that we are a community of faith, not solitary Christians.

The community of the Trinity is the pattern for the community of the church. There are two movements therefore. We are drawn into the presence of God in prayer and worship and thanksgiving, and through the church we are sent out from our own concerns to share our burdens and support each other.

Prayer is not a psychological trick to make us feel better; in prayer God reshapes our wills to fit what He wants and enables us to find peace.

I pray every day for our children, and grand-children. They have many joys and many sorrows, but even in sorrow God has showed He stands with us.

In our lives as a family we have known very deep trauma in the family, yet even then we were sustained by the presence of God through the Holy Spirit and by the love of God mediated through the church - the community of God.

Another area of pressure is work. One of the things that strikes me about China is how hard people work and the pressure they are under.

Pressure includes the pressure from within us to succeed.

St Augustine, one the greatest of the teachers of the church, living in the fourth and fifth centuries, wrote of the time before he was converted to Christ when he saw a beggar happy because the beggar had a full stomach. And Augustine envied him because although he himself was wealthy, he was never at peace because of the ambition within him.

Ambition is good, but it can become an idol that pushes Christ from our lives. Our worship is only Christ. Worship is what enables pressure from within and without to be managed. In praise and thanksgiving we realise again the unchangeable love that God has for us - God's sufficiency.

Pressure also comes from things not in the family (where we have influence), or from within us, but additionally from the great issues of the day, or things that happen to us, from issues of health to great issues like the environment.

The church is the gift of God that enables us to sustain the burden.

A friend of mine in Africa found his part of the country enveloped in war. Almost two million refugees flowed into the area. When I asked him how he coped, he said, "we did what God enabled us to do". It was "we" did, not just I. It was a witness of compassion for those who suffer (Matthew 25) and for the world God made, by the church together.

The church is a source of compassion and strength, one that we often forget.

All this brings us to the heart of witness that is the Christian community, living faithfully to Christ in the normal pressures of life as a blessing to its society in obedience to the leaders of that society, so as to enable the church to live in peace and to demonstrate to the world the reality of Jesus Christ.

Witness always includes words, but it starts with actions because it is those that people around us understand most clearly.

If people could be made Christians through argument alone, God would not have sent His Son, but a philosopher. If people could be persuaded to be good Christians by force, He would have sent a soldier. If people could be manipulated and tricked into being good Christians or bribed into being good Christians, He would have sent some kind of crooked person who was good at trickery.

But God did not do any of those things. Our loving Heavenly Father “so loved the world that He gave His only Son so that all who believed in Him should not perish but have eternal life” and he left a community of ordinary people like us, filled with the Holy Spirit, who exists to witness to the truth of Jesus.

The community of the Trinity is lived out in the sight of the world by the community of the church.

Which is why at the end of the reading is the call "always to be ready to give an explanation of the hope that is within" us, but gently and respectfully.

Are we each able to explain why we are Christians? If someone asks do we know what to say? Practice with a Christian friend. Know what you need to say that is respectful, gracious and answers only what someone asks.

A British theologian called Lesslie Newbigin describes the church as the interpreter of the gospel. The challenge is that we are to be community that is both such a blessing to its society and so different from all other communities that when people look at it they see the reality of God.

Christians who behave badly individually or as a community - by immorality, disunity, mutual attack and so forth - witness to people that God is bad. Christians who live with all the pressures of life and yet show that in Christ they find peace and hope give a witness to His truth and love.

Christian witness is based in churches that reach as a blessing into society and demonstrate that they have the peace of God. They are good, outward-looking and functional communities.

Where there are Christians, people should know that the hungry will be fed, those who are hurting will be healed, those who are lonely will be loved, those who are in despair will be brought hope, those who are disruptive will be taught to do the right thing and to love their country and society.

To live with Christians in such a community is also how we find freedom from the pressures and worries of all our lives.

In such a community the life of the Trinity is made visible, and in such a community we find our sure defence against all that life can throw at us.

8 min read

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