

Business Sunday: Matthew 22:1-14

Our reading this morning is a parable about rejecting the invitation of God. Some people ignore the invitation; others make light of it, and prefer to concentrate on business; some people even abuse and hurt those who bring them the invitation. Now obviously, we here at St Peter's are not people who have ignored the invitation. We haven't made light of the invitation. We're not people who work against God; we work for him – that's why we're here! We might even piously look at the eventual recipients of the invitation, and think of ourselves as being among those gathered in off the streets. We may not be much, we think to ourselves, but at least we've answered God's call.

But read on to the end. We mustn't be complacent here; even those called in off the streets are still subject to a rigorous standard. Even when you accept the invitation, you can still be thrown out of the party. You may have come to church all your life, you may be widely loved and respected, you may even have served on the PCC or led Junior Church or sung in the choir. What if you are – allegorically, speaking – not properly dressed, a guest without a wedding robe? What if, in other words, you're not quite fully "in" the party?

I've been here for six months now; and so in my own mind I've designated this Sunday "Business Sunday", an opportunity to talk about the real business of St Peter's. I've tried to give sermons from this pulpit which are encouraging; I've tried to be entertaining; I've tried to give you a little bit of theology. But today is about business, because it's time you heard what I really think about our church and community here.

So – what do I really think? I said in my address to the APCM in April that what I wanted to do at this church is "to make it clear, when anyone looks at the work of St Peter's, that here Christ is present, here is self-sacrificial love, and here is God's home, and heaven on earth." There are many times when I feel that is happening: at the Easter Vigil, in Sarah's sermon on feeding the five thousand, at the Flower Festival, particularly on that day of setting up, and at the concert; at the school's communion service; at the tea-party we held for some of the people helped by the Pastoral Commission; at last Sunday's

Harvest Festival; the choir's singing at the Patronal Festival. But it doesn't just happen in big events; I feel like it's heaven on earth standing in the garden of our Parish Hall after the Sunday service, with the garden looking so beautiful, and the children running around... So there's no doubt at all, for me, that there are many times when anyone looking at St Peter's could see that here Christ is present.

But we need more – and now is the time to say so. And in particular, just to be absolutely clear, to talk brass tacks, we need more work and more money.

Work

Recently I received a survey from our national central office – the “Church in Action” survey. Question 2 listed what the Church of England believes to be social problems in our country today. Low income, debt, isolation/loneliness, drug or alcohol abuse, family breakdown or poor parenting, low education/skills, domestic violence/abuse, poor housing, lack of self-esteem/hope, homelessness, benefit dependency, unhealthy lifestyles, mental health problems, crime or anti-social behaviour, unemployment. Then it asked “To what extent does your church serve people in the parish who are experiencing each of these problems?” So – what's the answer, people of St Peter's? I should say that actually, I think, in our own way, through friendships, through individual encounters, through our own work, we're collectively not drawing a total blank here. It's not an absolute zero. But it's very far from what we might be doing. And if we aren't doing work, in this way, what are we doing?

I look at all those problems mentioned in the survey and I can see why we don't tackle them. I think some of the problems might not be specific to Harborne. I think some of them are problems that might be divisive for our own community to try and solve: politically we're a mixture of right-wing and left-wing here and I don't want to disturb that – there's too much tribalism as it is in modern life. But one thing leaps out at me that I think it is in this church's blood to tackle – and that is isolation and loneliness. Too many people in our community, old and young, are isolated and lonely in their daily lives. Jesus is Emmanuel – God with us. We are supposed to bring that sense of God's presence to everyone, as part of our discipleship. How can we do it?

Money

People still think the Church of England is rich. People still think it's paid for by the government in some way, or by historic resources. Well, our church is not paid for by anyone else but us. If we don't pay for it, it closes. Everyone who values this place should realize that. Our annual expenditure as a church is around £210,000. So that means this church costs about £4040 a week. Calculated over a year, I believe we have an average of 90 adults in church each week. It may be as many as a hundred – but let's say it's 90. For us to pay our way each week, each adult would have to put £44 in the collection plate... I know, I know. That's pretty steep. In 2013, our income from giving was £53,117. Now, if there is an average of 90 adults in the congregation each Sunday, that's £11 in the collection plate each Sunday from each adult. Now – that's not bad – that's pretty good. If you break it down, however, and look at individual contributions, some people are carrying others. And that's fine – that's what we're all about. The strong should carry the weak. But some strong people are carrying a lot, and some strong people aren't carrying enough. Furthermore, look at the figures for the past years. In 2012 it was 56,402; in 2011, it was 61,000; in 2010, it was 63,615. Four years ago, we were giving ten thousand pounds more than we give today.

Fortunately in this church we have investments and we have property that we rent out. This income allows us generally to break even. However, breaking even means we can't do anything new, anything different, we can't make any changes, we don't have the resources to do something new. I've come in as a new Vicar, and what is my budget to bring about new work in this place? How will new ideas be funded? How will work happen?

I'm trying to set an example to you in your giving. It's not much, but it's what I'm giving. In order for the Diocese to function, and for the church to function nationally, our church has to pay a contribution to the Common Fund of the Diocese. Our contribution is currently £82000 – about 40% of our entire expenditure. Obviously we can't increase our giving to £44 per adult per week. But could we increase our individual giving so that we pay our Common Fund? 82000 divided by 52 divided by 90 gives us about £17.50 a person. With the

generous salary I get – £24,140 - I reckon I can pay £21 a week – that's 5% of my weekly income after tax. So that's what I give - £21 a week, £84 a month.

Now, I know this is difficult and dangerous territory for a Vicar to stray onto. I know this can make people uncomfortable and unhappy – even angry. I know people have found in the past this sort of appeal deeply unattractive. I don't know any of your financial circumstances, and, to be honest, I am grateful just that you're here. You don't have to pay a penny to be saved by God through Jesus Christ – that's already happened. But you do have to pay considerably more than a penny to support the work of the church which proclaims this salvation. That was the case when the church was young – read 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 – and it's the case today. I wouldn't ask if we didn't need it – and we do.

But why should we raise the money and do the work of the Church? Well, I refer you back to our readings this morning. As St Paul tells us, in Philippians 4, we should rejoice in the Lord always. And we have much to rejoice in, here at St Peter's. We have the opportunity to give people a dimension to their life that they wouldn't otherwise have – a message which is long-term (rather than short-term), spiritual (rather than material), self-transcending (rather than self-centred), peaceful (rather than noisy and busy), hopeful (rather than cynical and nihilistic), serious (rather than trivial), nourishment (rather than junk-food)... the most counter-cultural message around: the love of God is available to you all through Jesus Christ. This is a message of deep joy. Ultimately the sin of the wedding-guest without his wedding-robe is one of joylessness – he thinks he can be part of the party without fully entering the party-spirit. It's my belief that if we raise the money we need to do the work we must do, we will discover that real deep joy of the Kingdom of God, fully accepted into the wedding-feast of God. Amen

Revd. Graeme Richardson

12.10.14