

Mark 1: Energized by Faith

Colossians 1: 1-8; 3:17

Luke 1: 39-45

To begin with let's look at the bible passages.

Mary and Elizabeth; two women at different ends of the spectrum. Elizabeth – menopausal or post-menopausal now expecting her first child and Mary, an unmarried teenage mother.

Elizabeth has faith; despite long years of questioning why God had not blessed her, despite the undoubted humiliation she has suffered, the suspicion and stigma, she has remained faithful.

Mary has faith – despite being young, in trouble, stigmatised and having to take her leave to visit Elizabeth – Mary clutches faithfully to the promises of God.

Both these women are examples of steadfast faith despite cost and adverse circumstances. They are expectant - literally and metaphorically – for the promises of God.

What they know is that GOD IS FAITHFUL. Shame turns to joy.

Elizabeth has not been forgotten by her Lord.

Mary contains her Lord.

The Spirit of God reveals the purposes of God and the two women are bound together in awe, wonder and ecstasy.

As individuals are we expectant - do we believe that the promises of God are really for us? Do we really think that God will remember us? Or are these for other people and other churches in the centre of Cambridge, where the Spirit seems to have the upper hand?

Do we expect growth in faith and numbers? Do we really believe that we have something worth sharing that can transform lives? Do we believe that we have Good News to share? Or, is faith in Christ something to disguise, something that we have to tame a bit in conversation to make sure it fits the current emphasis on spiritual well being?

If St. Paul had been at pains to ingratiate himself with the socio-religious culture of his day, the Gospel would have foundered. The church in Colossae was facing exactly this danger. In a culture where the old Greco-Roman gods were increasingly discredited and boundaries between east and west had become blurred, the way opened for a blending of eastern religion with western philosophy. In this pagan world, new faiths sprang up in profusion. In Colossae, against this backdrop of religious exploration, there were both Gentile and Jewish Christians who felt that the Gospel needed embellishment and lacked

philosophical depth. In particular, it was thought that attention must be given to cosmic forces, because between God and humanity, influential angelic beings were supposed to act as mediators and must therefore be worshipped accordingly. This notion provoked Paul into what is probably the most comprehensive statement of the significance of Jesus, and his refusal to accept that Christ can be fitted into any composite religion.

Paul goes on to claim that Christ is the supreme power under God over the universe. Christ is ruler over all supernatural forces which may be thought to affect personal destiny. Christ is God in action: the creative purpose (Word) of God that shaped the universe, the meaning of existence, the unifying principle that underlies the whole cosmos, (cf. John 1).

What is it that we believe to be true about Christ? Is the name of Christ an embarrassment or have we been sucked into the prevalent *one religion among many* philosophy?

What or who do we have faith in?

Development Action Planning

Why are we doing the **Seven Marks of a Healthy Church** from *The Healthy Churches Handbook*? Because the diocese like to see development action planning. It used to be called Mission Action Planning, but when that term became equated with weariness of the soul, words were exchanged to give it a fresh spin.

You have no doubt been through this process at least 4 times over the past 15-20 years. I generally wait for a year before engaging a parish with this process to discover the personalities of a church, its real rather than named power brokers, to look at the various groups and methods of working, and to see what and who are around in the community.

Over the years I have discovered, along with many other vicars, that writing a plan for a parish offering finely detailed managerial solutions for a range of challenges generally results in failure, or perhaps a nicely presented work that languishes in a filing cabinet while nothing really changes.

A church flourishes and deadlocks are resolved when we have a well- developed sense of who we are, and why we are. When a community of people '*truly understand*] *God's grace*' it is then, at grass roots level, that ideas develop which are healthily rooted and grounded in context. Top-down dictats have a short, resented shelf-life and often tend to stunt Christian maturity. The key to everything is shared objectives. If we know *who we are* and *why* we might like to try something, there is every chance that the effort will bear fruit and be less contentious in the planning.

Faith is the essential underpinning of any church. It is the transformational agent in giving, receiving, learning, redeeming, forgiving, enjoying and cohering.

First question: How would you describe this church's character?

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The Seven Marks of a Healthy Church
expressing the life of Christ through the local church

Mark 1

Energized by faith (rather than just keeping things going or trying to survive)

Some churches lack internal energy, or their energy comes from less than healthy sources. Survival and control can be powerful motivators.

It is faith in God as revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit that is the source of vitality in the life of a healthy church. Different traditions express this in different ways but, in all of them, prayer is a natural part of personal and church life, faith is talked about as a natural part of life and conversation, and the name of Christ is not an embarrassment.

Where does the energy of this parish church come from?

1. Worship and sacramental life: a healthy church moves people to experience God's love

Worship is not necessarily about taking services; it is about helping people to encounter the presence of God. Common features of worship in a healthy church include:

Silence - to enable people to hear from God (but can be uncomfortable)

Testimonies and stories - in which people share experiences of God's action (happens when people are confident in their faith)

Celebration - of the reality and goodness of God (comes from gratitude to God and the joy of the Spirit)

An ability to engage corporately with brokenness in the world (results from honesty, compassion and an interest in and love for other people)

2. Motivation: in a healthy church energy comes from a desire to serve God and one another

Where people want to serve God and one another, this results in a sense of eagerness and enthusiasm. Where this is not present, churches can suffer from apathy, with a small group doing all the work. Where there is motivation only from secondary matters it will often be seen in competing personal agendas, personality clashes and power struggles.

Both Mary and Elizabeth were motivated to serve God and were willing human agents in God's salvific purposes.

3. Engages with Scripture: a healthy church engages with Scripture in creative ways that connect with life

Healthy churches are not afraid to wrestle with how the text of Scripture relates to life today and how it can and should be allowed to affect our values, choices and lifestyle.

If you extend the passage from Luke's Gospel we looked at earlier, you will read *Mary's Song* which contains many refrains from Scripture. Mary and Elizabeth knew God through the Scriptures and used the language in prayer and praise. Scripture shaped their knowledge of God; their hope, faith, aspirations and worship.

4. Nurtures faith in Christ: a healthy church helps people to grow in, and share, their faith

In healthy churches faith is not assumed, but spoken about and seen as central to the task of the church.

People are helped to reflect on their own experience of the grace and reality of God in their life - or to address the lack of it. They are helped to tell their own story, whether of their earlier journey *to* faith or of their current experience *on* the journey *of* faith.

Often, this will result in an awareness of sharing a common enterprise that, at its heart, has a spiritual base (irrespective of the existence of a Development Action Plan). Evangelism will be taking place irrespective of whether such sharing of the faith is organised or not - and irrespective of whether the word 'evangelism' is used or not.

Elizabeth and Mary both proclaimed the goodness and steadfast faithfulness of God. They were not engaged in diocesan programmes of evangelism but proclaimed the Good News of God through the joy of their personal experience.

Study the passages at home

Mark 1: Energized by faith

**Colossians 1: 1-6, 3:17; Luke 1:39-45 (what is happening here?);
Micah 5: 2-5 and Galatians 4:17-20 (what are we, as a church, meant
to be pregnant with?)**

The above passages are chosen by the author of the Handbook and contain the common themes of faith, expectancy and birth, of faith prefiguring birth. Note any thing that strikes you about the words you read before answering the questions below.

What is special about the church we are a part of?

What kinds of change are we *called* to make?

What kind of change might we *need* to make to be energized by faith?

What needs working on?

Read Matthew 15: 21-28

Why did Jesus seem to be playing 'hard to get'?

Meditation

The church is called to embody the life of Jesus Christ who said:

The Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing. (John 5:19)

