

St Mary's Holy Communion 16th July 2017

Proper 10 / 5th Sunday after Trinity

Isaiah 55:1-13 Romans 8:1-11 Matthew 13:1-9,18-23

think of a word beginning with 'c', a nice, positive word, that you'd like to use to describe yourself or to describe the church? what sort of people, or Christians, or church, do we aspire to be – beginning with the letter 'c'?

those who attended +Steven's evening at St Mary's, Slough, during his visit to this Deanery a couple of months ago, may recall the three words that he put before us then: Contemplative, Compassionate, and Courageous (it must just be a coincidence that his name, Croft, also begins with 'c!'); we are going to hear a lot more about these three words from the Diocese over coming months, I would guess

I want to begin to explore what these words might mean for us, as individuals and as a Parish; clergy colleagues have assured me that, whatever the Sunday, and whatever the readings set for the day, you're sure to be able to make some connection with these three words – so here goes ...

I'll begin with a quote from +Steven's blog:

[you can read more here – <https://blogs.oxford.anglican.org/>]

'I have been asking two questions as I travel [around the Diocese], what kind of Church are we called to be and what are we called to do together as a Diocese?

I believe we are called to be a more *Christ-like* church: As many of you will know, I've been searching for just three words which will capture that ethos for the next part of our life together: to bind the Diocese together in God's mission and to guide us forward.

The three words are settling now. I believe we are called to be and become a *contemplative* diocese, rooted in God's presence, in peace, and wholeness and stillness. In a wounded, fractured world, it is only a deeply contemplative Church which can bring God's grace and love to those who need it.

I believe we are called to be and become a *compassionate* Church: taking seriously the wounds of God's people. I believe we are called to be and become a *courageous* Church: courageous in bringing peace; courageous in seeking justice; courageous in our witness to God's love in Jesus Christ.'

so, what do you think of them: Contemplative, Compassionate, and Courageous? these are ways of being, rather than things to do; very different therefore from the Living Faith priorities we've been working with over the last few years – 'Sustaining the sacred centre', 'Making a difference in the world', and so on

but I like these three words; they have a richness and a depth about them, but an openness and flexibility too, that leaves us free to understand and live them out in a way that works for us; let's take a look at them one by one:

contemplative – what does this mean? it includes prayer, of course; one of our parish priorities is to grow in prayer, and that means both the discipline of daily personal prayer, as well as coming together to pray as church; that's an area we should continue to work on

but to be contemplative is more than something to do; it goes deeper into our whole orientation towards God, from which comes the way we see ourselves and the world; can we imagine carrying that ‘contemplativeness’, that stillness and inward attention to God with us into our everyday tasks?

you may be familiar with Brother Lawrence and his ‘practice of the presence of God’, even when doing the cooking or the washing-up! perhaps we tend to separate prayer and life too much, and they need to be integrated more, so that we can be contemplative in every thought, word and action, not just when we are ‘praying’

Paul was deeply aware of the struggle in each of us to bring together what we know in our inmost selves, and how we actually behave; last week we read in Romans 7: ‘I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members [i.e. in my body, in my outward behaviour] another law at war with the law of my mind; wretched man that I am! who will rescue me?’

today we heard the answer to that cry for help, in Romans 8: ‘there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, for the law of the spirit of life has set you free from the law of sin and death’; and again: ‘to set the mind on the spirit is life and peace’ – that is what being *contemplative* means; as we set our minds more on God, as we give our full attention to him, and carry that attention into our daily lives, then we are promised ‘life and peace’, and we are set free to be and to do all that God calls us to – and that moves us naturally on to our second word:

compassionate – this includes practical action to help those in need, of course; we do seek to ‘make a difference in the world’ in a variety of ways; we see the great needs around us, we hear the stories of terrible suffering, we have to do something: so we give money to relieve poverty on the other side of the world; or we contribute to the Foodbank, and volunteer at the Coffee Shop, Blind Club or Night Shelter – we want to show God’s love to people

but let’s be sure to root that *compassionate* activity in our own *contemplative* awareness of God’s love for us; some of us (like me) are activists and keen to get on and do something; others are more inward and reflective; but the two belong together

I receive a daily thought by email called Morning Bell; the other week I read this: ‘stillness and action are vital and connected, not opposites but companions’; Richard Rohr, head of the ‘Centre for Action and Contemplation’, was once asked which word in that title was most important; he answered, the word ‘and’! we need to be *both* contemplative and compassionate

so activists (like me) need to be more contemplative, so that our actions flow from the right place; and some more reflective people might want to consider how their inner life is best expressed in action; we become more Christ-like, as we share in his work of compassion; our outward compassion is a measure of our inward faith

Jesus’ Parable of the Sower in Matthew 13 might be read as a call to action, ‘come on, get on with it, bear some fruit!’; but notice where that fruitfulness comes from – from seed growing in good soil; the contrast is with stony ground, or ground infested with thorns, where distractions and opposition, ‘the cares of the world and the lure of wealth’, stifle our fruitfulness

if we are to be ‘good soil’ for God’s word, and bear fruit in works of compassion, we must allow that seed of the word to put down deep roots within us, and that only happens in the place of stillness and contemplation

a couple of weeks ago, at St Mary's Patronal Festival, we wrote down things we hope for and what gives us hope – it was interesting to read them afterwards; sometimes the gap between hope and reality seems just too big; we find ourselves getting exhausted and dispirited, we run out of energy, time, love; we must constantly renew our resources of compassion and hope, and that only happens by being contemplative!

now to our third word ...

courageous – this is probably the most challenging of the three words to live out; there’s an element of risk and sacrifice involved in being church and Christian, that we may be reluctant to face up to

but there’s no avoiding it; in recent gospel readings we’ve heard Jesus say things like, ‘whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me’, and ‘those who lose their life for my sake will find it’ (Matthew 10)

and the context for today’s verses from Matthew 13 is one of resistance and opposition to Jesus and his message; the Pharisees have criticised him for not observing the Sabbath properly, and even accused him of being in league with the devil; the crowds only follow him in hope of a miracle, and his own family are baffled by him too

so Jesus tells this Parable of the Sower about himself, patiently, courageously proclaiming God’s word, in the face of hatred and incomprehension; that word, as Isaiah 55 promises, ‘will not return empty and will accomplish that which God purposes’, but the road will be a hard one, one that takes much courage; it is the way of the cross

we can probably think of more contemporary examples, like Martin Luther King, or Desmond Tutu, or Mother Theresa, or Pope Francis, or Andrew White in Baghdad; but we don’t need to be figures on a world stage to be courageous

just to be ‘visibly Christian’ these days is to court a degree of mockery and incomprehension; ‘surely you can’t believe that rubbish any more!’; ‘you can’t trust the church – it is full of hypocrites!’; and the like – it takes courage then just to be yourself

and then there is the courage, and effort, of making peace, seeking justice, of campaigning and lobbying MPs and councillors, to ‘encourage’ them to make right decisions

there’s lots more to be said, but there are our three words to reflect on: Contemplative, Compassionate, Courageous; I like to think of them as inviting us to pay attention in certain ways: contemplatively inwards towards God, compassionately outwards towards those in need, and courageously in resisting those things that act against the peace and compassion of Christ

which of these comes easiest to us? and which do we need to work on – as individuals, as church? something for us each to think about, to discuss together, and to pray for God’s leading over the coming months