

**Sixth Sunday after Trinity 2015 (Evensong)**

**Job 4:1; 5: 6 – 27; Romans 15: 14 – 29**

“Fresh Expressions of Church” is where it is all at at the moment. If you want to talk the talk in church circles, you need to have the vocabulary of Fresh Expressions; and if you want to do any form of training for accredited ministry in the church, you’ll be encouraged to think outside the box and be receptive to ideas of how the church can re-create itself.

There are two sources of impetus for this. The first is quite simply that church, as we know it, seems not to be working any more. Church attendance is in free fall. If you rely just on statistical analysis and look at a graph of church attendance and plot where the downward trend of the line is going, it won’t be that many years until the church goes out of existence: there will be no-one left going to church.

Of course, we don’t just rely on statistical analysis. We rely on God as well! We believe that however bad things may be, the Word of the Lord will endure for ever. It’s the message of our reading from Job this evening that however dire things are objectively, however afflicted we may be - even to the legendary levels affliction that beset Job – God will deliver us.

That’s the good news; but the rather more alarming aspect of it is that God’s deliverance is dependent upon our co-operation. There’s no room for being conceited. There’s no place for saying we needn’t be anxious about the desperate plight the church is in, because we can just sit back and let God sort it. St. Theresa of Avilla said “God has no hands but ours.” God will sort it, but only by these hands getting dirty in his cause.

The second source of impetus for seeking fresh ways for church to be expressed is that there is plenty of evidence that God is very active in people’s lives; just

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

that organised religion as we know it isn't helping them to express it. There's spirituality, but an incoherent and inchoate – in other words, not fully formed or thought through – form of spirituality. People do have a sense of interconnectedness. They are moved to seek to express their empathy with others through ritual. But the ritual is spontaneous and disorganised. The challenge for the church is to meet people in that place, to support them and to work out together how to coin a language that articulates what's going on. The emphasis has to be on working things out together. It's no good saying that the church knows what's good for you, so come and get it. Because they won't.

Now, none of this need be threatening to all that people like me – and, because you're here at Choral Evensong, I think it's safe to assume I can say – people like us hold precious. You can say all this stuff without rubbishing the heritage with which we're blessed.

I think today is the Ben Norton Day at the Priory. In this morning's sermon at 10.30, Jean Fowler was citing Ben Norton and I want now to refer to a conversation I was having with him a couple of weeks ago. Ben Norton served his curacy as a pioneer minister, pioneering fresh ways of being church here in Brid. That was some years ago and he's now one of the most senior pioneer ministers in the diocese. Ben is clear that as a minister pioneering fresh expressions of church, he has to work in partnership with inherited church, not just because it's diplomatically savvy to do so, but because it's necessary as a matter of pragmatic tactics to do so. What he pioneers reaches people who – thus far – are completely culturally removed from church. But, once they've been reached, the wacky alternative stuff doesn't necessarily nourish them. He's got to be able to feed some into inherited church and to be able to put on the wacky stuff for others. There's got to be a mixed economy. And that mixed economy should be mutually supportive.

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

And, do you know what? There's nothing new under the sun. That's how it's always been and that's how it ought to be when church is operating at its best. How often do we hear that we ought to get back to the church being what it was like in New Testament times? Well, the picture of the New Testament church we're given in this evening in the second reading, the one from Romans, shows us precisely this sort of mixed economy operation church at work; and at work under the leadership of none other than St.Paul himself.

St.Paul was a pioneer minister if ever there were one; pioneering entirely fresh expressions of church, entirely fresh because there was nothing inherited to build upon. He's told us in this evening's reading that his calling was always to go to entirely new places and start from scratch with people for whom religious traditions had no meaning and no relevance. And he didn't impose it on them. If pioneer ministers today are saying that actually there are ways to express being church without church buildings, without standing

because we're saying the creed or whatever, without it necessarily having to be Sunday when we do our worship; St.Paul was saying that actually there are ways to express being church without getting circumcised or without only eating kosher food or without necessarily having to be attached to a synagogue.

But for all the brave, new, radical, fresh things Paul was doing, he wasn't breaking away from the traditional church that Peter & Co had founded in Jerusalem. And when he sets off from Macedonia to go to Spain, hoping to call in at Rome on the way – although perhaps not in the circumstances he ended up arriving in Rome and not getting beyond there – he goes via Jerusalem in order to take aid to brothers and sisters there who are in need. He says “If the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material blessings.”

The Revd Matthew Pollard, Rector of Bridlington Priory

You may know that, here in Brid, there is presently no vicar at Emmanuel Church. It's hoped that there might be some sort of reconfiguration to the south of Bridlington to free up some time within the Emmanuel post for someone to pioneer fresh expressions of church across Brid. Let's pray firstly that that proves possible and secondly that we might work together in the service of God's mission to establish a mixed economy, mutually supportive church here in Brid.

Amen.