

## WHO PLANTS, WHO WATERS AND WHO GROWS THE CHURCH?

Jeremiah 31.27-36; 1 Cor 3.1-9; Matt 16.13-18

GENERAL SYNOD SERMON, ST SAVIOUR'S CATHEDRAL 21 OCTOBER 2007

By

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The Israelites had deserted God and broken their covenant with him. Judgment is coming. But God still loves his people so this time he will put the law into our hearts and we shall all know God from the least to the greatest. God's love will conquer our desertion.

It reminds me of our recent visit to Tyne Cot cemetery near Ypres in Belgium on the site of the Battle of Passendale in October 1917 – 90 years ago. We came across two wreaths just laid – one by the Queen and one by your Governor General. We were surrounded by the graves of fallen Australian soldiers whose remains were never identified. Each gravestone was marked – An Australian soldier of the Great War, Known unto God. It made me realize the depth of history and the bonds of family that unite our two countries. And also what our business here is all about – every Australian is still known unto God but the ambition we have for this country is for every Australian to know God in return – through our Lord Jesus Christ and the work of his Holy Spirit. That mission is our core business.

So I'm here to talk about growing the church until every Australian knows God. God does not start with our growth, he starts with his love.

You personally, each individual, and we collectively, God's church, are deeply, personally loved by our Heavenly Father. His patience with us is not exhausted. I was born in 1949. The church in Britain has been in decline almost all my lifetime. But God is not done with my generation and he will forever love his church and my calling is to see the Church flourish and grow again before I join the church triumphant.

Now it is God who grows his church yet choosing to rely on our help. Jesus looks into the eyes of his new friend and disciple Simon, seeing all the character flaws and all the mistakes, and yet makes this statement of faith of God in man – You are Peter and on this Rock I will build my church. Jesus loves & trusts his church leaders so much that he makes us the rocks on which he builds.

Paul pictures the church as a living organism, like a field or garden with plants growing. It is God who causes the growth but he chooses to rely on us to plant and waters in order to allow and sustain the growth. The church is God's child, Christ's bride, the Spirit's creation on the day of Pentecost, and it is God's responsibility to grow the church he loves and Jesus died for. Yet we are given the privilege of being God's fellow-workers, planting and watering. And we must plant and water well in the mould of Paul and Apollos.

Now in most of the world Jesus' church growth project is going pretty well! The greatest mass movement to the Christian faith in history is currently taking place in China. God has not lost his touch nor his love. And the people have not lost their need of God. Even in the Western Countries that have seen overall church decline, faithful individual churches, denominations and dioceses resonate with the culture of the people, are winsome in their planting and watering, flourish and grow. Post-moderns may tick differently from my generation but they still tick, they are still spiritual beings made in the image of God, hearts restless till they find their rest in Christ.

So when our church or our denomination or diocese is in decline we don't blame the population, or God, but we cry out for renewal in repentance and faith to the God who is desperate for us to fulfil our mission of planting and watering the garden of his delight that is his church, his child, his bride, his body here on earth. The church transforms and grows through repentance of heart for our own failings and inadequacies and a turning to live in a new way in the future.

In England millions of people have left the churches. Many have drifted away unnoticed and unloved by their local churches. If the church is a bath and the people are the water it is mainly God's job to turn on the tap. And he is doing his job. People still come to us. But the level of water in the bath is going down both because some of the tap water splashes straight out of the bath and because there is no plug in the plug hole. People leave faster than they arrive. It's God's job to give us the people, it's our job to keep them. Every new comer should be known, loved and cared for by the members of the church. Every body needs a home in the small as well as the large, friends who know them and pray for them and who will bind them with cords of love that will not let them go. Churches should be such places of joy, holiness, community and encounter with the living God that no-one should ever dream of leaving.

And how easy is it for newcomers to join the Christian community? It's one thing to attend a service, it's another to join the community. A few years ago I stopped being a parish priest after 20 years and took on a national mission job for the Archbishops. We found a church to go to. After four months I said to the vicar – I'll take a service for you if you like. So a couple of weeks later I led to a communion service for the 90 or so people we had been worshipping with every week for four months. Person after person shaking hands with me on the way out said, "thank you for visiting us today." We tried for nearly a year but could not join the community of the church, and even we, with our commitment level, left. Then we found a church we could belong to as well as just attend.

Most people give a church either one or two weeks. If someone has made two or three friends in the first few weeks they will stay. If not they won't. Most of the people God gives us do not find human friendship in the churches they try out and leave almost as soon as they started coming. I met some Church Life Survey people the other day and they told me here that about 8% of the people who try out a church in one way or another become integrated into its membership. 92% don't. Out of every 100 people God gives us we retain eight.

This is not always our fault and while it will never be 100%, where there is welcome, where agape love is on offer people do stay and they may join an Alpha group or some other nurture course, or quietly come to faith by themselves nourished by the Sunday worship and by prayer and Bible, and they bring their

own friends and lives are transformed. These days most people first belong then they believe then they behave, starting to live their lives by the light of Christian morality.

So God grows the church but he allows us to plant and water. God gives us the people then the church grows and it is our job in the churches to keep and nurture them into discipleship. These truths are derived from scripture and experience but also from my own specialty – statistical enquiry leading to evidence-based decision making in the church.

Here is an example of what we learn when we look the statistical truth straight in the eyes and use it to transform the church from decline to growth. The results of looking at attendance trends in churches that take on a youth or children's worker are startling. When we put serious resources into evangelism and ministry among the young then they respond. Parishes with no youth worker went from 9 – 8 children on average. Those with such workers went on average from 35 – 42 children. As a matter of policy, the number of such workers in our diocese of Lichfield has gone up from 10 to 50 in the last three years. For the first time in generations we are now seeing more children in our churches this year than last year. In fact, having devised a Growth strategy based on statistical evidence we have now been set free from the slow death of numerical decline and we seem to be growing again. And the dioceses' finances have also turned around. We have faced the truth and the truth is setting us free.

I have already seen enough in Australia to know that you too are beginning to turn the tide through a new intentionality to grow and flourish for the kingdom of heaven. I'll report to you what I have learnt about recent attendance trends in Australia during the bible reading, but it seems from the data available so far that in the last year or two attendance has stopped going down nationally, and may even be now rising. Keep energetically pursuing your evangelism, church growth and fresh expressions agenda and by the grace of God you will succeed.

We are confident that because it is already beginning to work. Perhaps our greatest days are in the future not in the past.

But for today let's absorb the great truth I started with. God loves his people. He stands by us even when we let him down. He loves his church and builds his church. Yet he chooses to trust us to be the rocks on which he builds. May we be worthy of his trust as we lead his church in a new era of mission, evangelism and growth in the name of Christ, the power of the spirit. Amen.