

Second sermon preached at St Mary's by Vaughan S. Roberts on the results of the Second 8 Essential Qualities survey

Advent 2 2016

People will be aware from the newsletter that I've been asked to address *mission* and *evangelism* during Advent – specifically in relation to our survey earlier this year for the diocesan initiative of the 8 Essential Qualities for a healthy church. In our second survey, the category of 'Need-Oriented Evangelism' replaced 'Passionate Spirituality' as our weakest of the eight factors and becomes the one we need to focus on next.

My plan is to look at four simple questions over the four weeks of Advent. First, what are mission, evangelism and outreach? Second, what do the more *negative* results of our survey tell us about evangelism in this church? Third, what do the most *positive* results of our survey tell us about evangelism at St Mary's? And fourth, how should we go forward as we seek to address 'Need-Oriented Outreach'? Last week we looked at the question of evangelism, and copies are available online and in church. So this week we'll explore the three questions which produced the lowest response, which were:

- *I pray for my friends, colleagues and relatives who do not yet know Jesus that they will come to faith.*
- *New Christians find friends in our church quickly*
- *Our church tries to help those in need (food, clothing, education, counsel, etc)*

These are quite distinct questions and, speaking personally, the answers I'd give come from diverse angles. For me the first question: *I pray for my friends, colleagues and relatives who do not yet know Jesus that they will come to faith* is a theological one. The second question: *New Christians find friends in our church quickly* is about the kind of church St Mary's is. As is the third one: *Our church tries to help those in need (food, clothing, education, counsel, etc)* but comes at it from another angle. Let me briefly explain what I mean, beginning with that first question.

My hunch is that if the question had just been the first part: *I pray for my friends, colleagues and relatives* the positive response rate would've been much higher – maybe as much as 100%. After all, who doesn't regularly or irregularly pray for family and friends, godchildren and neighbours, even people we bump into either as a matter of course or out of the blue?

Prayer's a personal matter and it can be helpful to have something which structures our prayer lives. I'm very grateful to Kirsteen for creating a prayer diary for our church which I do hope people will use – not only to support St Mary's with your prayers but also to contribute suggestions, ideas and needs for prayer in coming months. One idea people might find useful in getting started is to take one of the candles we used at our Advent Carol Service and light it when you say the prayer for each day – those candles are available today if you didn't keep yours and think that would be helpful.

However, the second part of that question, which asks us to pray for those *who do not yet know Jesus that they will come to faith* is more challenging in the theological assumptions it makes. Let me make two points here. First, this week the Archbishop of Canterbury appointed Ruth Mawhinney as his new head of communications. In a 2014 interview, she's quoted as saying: "There's a tendency, especially if you are a Christian ... to get sucked into a bubble where all your friends are Christians ... Your Christianity becomes

your hobby basically. So anything that helps that section of people push outside of that, I think is really useful.” <https://www.bmsworldmission.org/engagcatalyst/engage-interviews/5-minutes-with%E2%80%A6-ruth-mawhinney>

So there’s an aspect of this question which is asking respondents to look outwards – away from this bubble towards the world. I suspect this is less of a challenge for congregations at St Mary’s because (for better or worse) we’re not as introverted and self-focussed as some churches (and this has implications for the other two questions.) Nevertheless, there may be *some* that answered this question who didn’t feel they knew many non-Christians.

Second, there’s the matter of the judgement call this question asks of us: *Who am I* to say whether a person *does not yet know Jesus*? We may know people who **are** seeking faith and have asked us to remember them in our prayers but what about others? And that brings us to a basket of theological issues: What does ‘knowing Jesus’ mean? Why is it important to know Jesus? What if someone doesn’t know Jesus? Those are profound matters and relate back to something we explored last week – mission, outreach and evangelism mean different things to different people. And the ways in which we answer those questions will differ too. That’s a strength rather than a weakness and we’ll come back to that in a moment.

So, more briefly, some comments on the other two low scores in our survey. Second lowest was: *New Christians find friends in our church quickly*. Every church has its own distinct ministry and it’s comparatively easy to see that in a place like Warwick – a smallish town with a team ministry of diverse churches. Warwick runs the spectrum of the Church of England with catholic spirituality at All Saints to a more ‘New Wine’ approach at St Paul’s. Rightly or wrongly, St Mary’s has a civic ministry to town, district and county which brings its own opportunities and challenges. One of those challenges is that we’re less of a group-orientated church than many. In her book on mission Helen Cameron makes a distinction between ‘small group’ churches and ‘public utility’ churches and we’re more the latter than the former (Helen Cameron, *Resourcing Mission*, SCM 2010). Having said that, people who’ve been involved in the life of St Mary’s for many years say we’re more friendly and welcoming than in the past. That’s to be celebrated and we should continue to strive in improving that element of our life together.

And finally: *Our church tries to help those in need*. One challenge for all churches is letting people know what’s going on. Because of my privileged position as vicar, I’ve seen people doing a great deal to help those in need. We’re doing it today with our collection of Christmas treats for the Foodbank, we do it regularly with our Outward Giving Sundays and some may recall that for some time we had Stephen living under the holly bush in the churchyard. People at St Mary’s tried and tried again to get him the help he needed and it was only through dogged persistence (and ongoing support of Stephen himself) that he was finally housed in sheltered accommodation where he’s now doing so much better. We do help those in need, though we can always do more.

In my previous sermon I shared the story of Paganini playing the music of his soul after his prized violin was stolen, with the lesson that *our* ‘mission’ is likewise to walk out on the stage of this world and reveal the music of God’s grace that’s in our souls. That music will be different for each of us as we face these challenges with outreach and so one crucial thing for us as a church as we seek to address these questions is that the *soul* music we’re making is in harmony with each other rather than discordant. And we’ll return to that theme in future sermons.