

26/6/11 Trinity 1. Romans 6:12-23. Matthew 10:40-42.

What kind of a church do we want St.Marks to be? I would guess that if we went around this congregation this morning and asked that question of each one of us, we would get some very interesting answers! Some would answer that they would want our church to be a happy and a joyful and a worshipping place. Others would probably say that we need to be a welcoming church. And yet others probably recognise that we need to be a serving church. ALL of these answers are of course correct. We want to be all of those things don't we? And behind and underpinning all of these answers, we need to keep before us the fact that we are a part of the Christian church which is one of the only organisations in the world that *exists primarily for those who do not yet belong*. And so, the kind of church we are is so very important to the way that people outside see us. Remember those New Testament words, I'm unsure in which book they occur, but the writer said, and I quote "See those Christians, how much they love one another." Is that how St.Mark's is seen?

In our readings this morning, Jesus is speaking to His first disciples, the apostles, the infant church in Palestine. And St.Paul, in his turn is addressing the young church in Rome. Both are highlighting different aspects of the Christian life as they saw that it should be lived. Jesus says "If anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is My disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward". Humility - it's a wonderful thing isn't it? *Actually, I'm always telling people that I'm really quite famous for it!!* We all want to be rewarded don't we? Even just the basic courtesy of those two polite little words "thank you". They are a very small thing but not an insignificant sign of our appreciation. And we need to know that all our hard work or our deeds of kindness or our generosity towards others is acknowledged by them. All of these things are what we all crave, aren't they? Well, I suppose, it's only human, after all, to want to be recognised. To know that others regard us with thankfulness, with gratitude, that we are appreciated. We are always looking for recognition in all of these things, aren't we? As I said to someone in this church quite recently, someone who felt that they are always being overlooked, taken for granted and receive no acknowledgement for all that they do; if you are almost invisible in the scheme of things and you receive no thanks for all that you do, then this is actually the highest form of flattery. It's actually a back-handed compliment, if you like, that your loyalty and your consistency and your faithfulness, all of these which are such important

attributes, such valuable human characteristics, whether it is in the bosom of our families, or whether it is at work or even within this church, that to be taken for granted really is a sign that we are trusted and that our loyalty is consistent. We can truly be relied upon at all times and trusted in all situations. But if we are truthful to ourselves, the most important thing for us all to know and to recognise is that it's God Who sees it all, and it is for God that we do these things - not for the reward of thanks, nor for the reward of recognition. It's our Heavenly Father, He it is Who is the One Who is grateful. He it is Who will give you your reward, as Jesus puts it, "The one who gives a cup of cold water to one of these little ones, will certainly not lose his reward."

But you know, this is what this church of St. Mark Biggin Hill is all about. What we, corporately, as God's family in this place are here for. We should stand out like a shining beacon on a hill in the midst of this community, a beacon of God's love, a place where everyone can come and feel comfortable, a place which people can always take for granted. St. Mark's should be a place where everyone can be welcomed and loved and healed. We, as the family of God, will always be here in one form or another (God-willing) for those who need His reassurance and the love and the concern of His people. Especially when things go wrong. People will invariably turn to God, when they don't understand why they are in such pain. Perhaps, because a loved one has suddenly died. Or when they receive some frightening or worrying news from the doctor about their health. Or, perhaps, because their years of faithfulness to their partner, has been spurned or has suddenly ended in betrayal. Or perhaps when they have been doing a job for many years, and are suddenly made redundant, making them feel as though they've been thrown out, discarded, on to the scrap-heap. We, as the Body of Christ in this place, need to be, as Jesus puts it, that "cup of cold water" for all of these people, ready to quench their thirst for spiritual reassurance and love, ready to reassure them that their lives really are still worthwhile and full of meaning, when their world seems to have caved in. That's what Christ means when He talks of our giving this "cup of cold water" to His little ones. And that's the sort of church we need to be and to keep on being.

But what of St. Paul's teaching in his letter to the young church in Rome? He talks of living in the Christian way. To us in the 21st century, some of his language sounds somewhat harsh and primitive when he talks about "evil desires" and "instruments of wickedness". It almost sounds as though he is addressing the people of Sodom and Gomorrah! So we need

therefore to put his words into some kind of context. He was talking in his letter to new Christians in Rome, that powerful capital of perhaps the most powerful and dominant empire the world has ever known. Those newly converted Christians had not only come from a society extremely lax in its morals, but they had to continue to live in that society, a society given over to every kind of immorality you could imagine. His warning to the Roman church is to be aware and wary of the habits and ways of those around them, in the society from which they, having adopted the new moral standards of the Kingdom of Christ will now stand out. And of course his overall teaching in this passage is about "grace". Over and against his Jewish background, which was steeped in the trials and tribulations of trying and failing to obey the moral laws of Mosaic tradition, he makes it quite plain that he believes that he has been set totally free from the power of sin by the self-giving, sacrificial, saving act of Christ's death on the cross. And that as a result, God has enacted His free grace to us all, the forgiveness of our past sins, the grace of His unconditional pardon and forgiveness, unearned and undeserved. Now those Roman Christians might easily have latched on to this religious concept of "free grace" to immediately respond by saying, "In that case, we can do just what we like, commit any kind of sin, because God will freely forgive us anyway"! And so Paul in his letter goes to great lengths to counter this by using the analogy of slaves. In the Roman world, slaves were common-place. Paul even included slaves in many of his religious observations, instructing them to obey their masters and to be loyal to them in the Name of Christ. Slaves were individuals who had to give themselves to their masters to whom they belonged, body and soul. Unlike a servant, who worked a set number of hours a day for their wages, and then the rest of his time was their own, a slave had no such luxury. He was his masters, body and soul, 24/7. Furthermore, a slave had no choice of lifestyle, he was bonded to his master for life, and only could become free at his masters choice. Whereas, a servant had the choice either of working for HIS master or not, as he alone should decide.

And so, Paul makes this direct contrast for the Christian way of life between the old past life of sin and death on the one hand, and the new life of holiness in Christ on the other hand. He describes the new Christian as being a slave to righteousness. When Paul uses the word "righteousness", he means *a right relationship with God*. It's meaning is probably not what we think it is. The person who is righteous is the person who is in a right relationship with God, and whose life shows it. I can remember at a particular point way back in the past when someone

who became a very good friend to Kathy and me, some one who was searching for God, once pointed out a lovely old gentleman who was a long-standing member of this church who used to regularly lead our corporate prayers and read out many of the Old Testament lessons. She once said, "What I want is what He's got." His faith and his holiness and his righteousness shone forth so obviously from every aspect of his life. A *right relationship with God* is what we should all aspire to. And that right relationship with God must be worked out through the hurly burly of our daily lives, as we face the pressures and temptations and distractions of our world, and as we grow in holiness and in the power of the Holy Spirit. It must begin with a review of where we are in our life of faith. Do we walk every minute of every day, conscious of His Presence? Do we walk with the Lord consciously? Do we bring our thanks, our worship and every problem large and small, every fear and worry to Him? God is interested, you know, in absolutely every aspect of our lives, from the minor and perhaps seemingly unimportant things to the very large and abiding decisions which we all have to make from time to time in our lives. And this constant review of where our faith is should be visited and revisited regularly, not just during our seasons of Advent and Lent, when we are asked to take stock of our faith, but throughout our lives. We have just recently completed our mission in this church of reviewing and renewing our stewardship for God. Of examining the ways in which we can better serve the Kingdom of God in this place through our giving of our time, talents and resources. We should all have prayed about that and then waited upon God and then responded to His silent call to our hearts and to our consciences, as we reviewed our particular place and role in the life of His family here. You know, if we didn't do it then, it's still not too late for us to do it now.

And so, in summary, the two teachings we are given in our bible readings this morning are quite simply these. Firstly, we, as individual Christians in the Kingdom of God, should continually strive to be in a right relationship with God, a relationship which includes absolutely every aspect of our lives, whether it be in our work, our rest or our play, in our personal and individual relationships and in our church and family relationships. None of us can really be called a true Christian if we simply 'pidgeon-hole' our faith, and exclude God from certain parts of our lives. And secondly, we must all play our part here at St. Mark's to be that "cup of cold water" as Jesus describes it, to His little ones - all of those who need the support and the reassurance of God's strength, ministry and love. I still remember those words of Bill Raffaelli, an elderly member of this congregation,

since departed to be in glory with the Lord, who once said, "St.Marks shouldn't be called the *Moving Church*, it should be called the *Loving Church*." As I said at the opening of this address, St.Mark's is a beacon of God's love and hope on a hill in the midst of this community. So, my friends, let us all, each and every one of us strive to keep it that way. Amen.