

St. Mary's Sermons

Acts:2

Pentecost

Have you read the article in the May edition of LifeSigns magazine, entitled "The Church in 2050, what the future could look like"? The article, which is based on the results of the religious questions in the 2011 population census, predicts that if current trends continue, by then church attendance will have dropped to just 1.5% of the population, which is predicted to be 70 million. There will be just 30,000 churches left in the country, with an average congregation size of just 35, which is half the current average size. It is also likely that by then, there will be as many Muslims living in this country as there will be Christians. I don't know about you but I find these predictions to be very scary and saddening indeed!

Whilst we are thinking about the future of the church, it has recently come to my attention that some of you are unhappy that I'm not here every Sunday and that I have to split my time with the Parish of Brinsley with Underwood. I'm sure there would be those in Brinsley & Underwood who would say the same thing. I hear that some of you are rather hoping that we will soon be able to go back to the scenario of your Vicar being only responsible for one Parish. Of course, I would prefer it if this were the case. However, one priest having to look after two or more parishes is fast becoming the norm. I'm sorry to have to disappoint you but the days of one clergy person per church are sadly over. *Further change in the deployment of clergy is in fact inevitable.* As some of you will be aware, the Diocese are already planning for 2020, which is only 7 years away, when it is anticipated that nationally there will be a further 20% reduction in the number of clergy. We are assured by the powers that be that this reduction is not primarily motivated by a lack of finance but by insufficient ordinands coming forward to replace the number of clergy who are due to retire, and before you get any ideas, no I will not continue to work until I'm 75 or even 70 for that matter! I hoped to have retired to a golf course by the sea before then!

Why have I shared all this with you this morning? What has this got to do with Pentecost Sunday? It seems to me that there are at least two possible responses to this article about the church in 2050. You might be thinking, what has this got to do with me, it won't really affect me? I'll be long gone by then. Well I've got news for you I won't be here either; I'll be 90 by then! But it is no good selfishly thinking that we can simply carry on just as we have always

done, and we can come along to church every Sunday and enjoy the same old familiar services without being concerned about the future of the church.

Incidentally, I do hope no one is sat there complacently thinking that we are ok here at St Mary's just because we have seen some growth in the number of people in our church attendance over the past few years. Or for that matter that we are ok in our Diocese Just because, as you might have heard, the 2010 statistics for mission indicate that churches in our diocese are growing as fast as anywhere in the country.

Or this news could, as I believe that it should, act as a wake-up call to us all. By that I do not mean that we should start to engage in lots of new extra activities of an evangelistic nature. I do not believe that there is any quick fix solution to the alarming decline we have witnessed in church attendance. It is not simply a matter of adopting this strategy or that programme and everything will be ok. Good though the Alpha course is it is not going to solve our problem. Nor should we be looking to messy church or café church or pioneer ministers and fresh expressions of church, or for that matter to any to any other human initiative to get us out of the predicament that we find ourselves in.

I believe that the single most important thing that we can all do is to earnestly pray for revival. To pray that God will have mercy upon us. That he will forgive us when we have kept the good news to ourselves or when we have been too busy with other things, like pursuing our careers or our family, to devote ourselves to using our gifts for his kingdom purposes, or when we have turned people away from him by (1) our failure to live a gospel lifestyle and (2) our divisions. To pray that he will rise up a new young generation of men and women who will faithfully carry the batten of faith.

The only way that the decline of the church can be halted is for God to pour out afresh upon us the power of the Holy Spirit and equip us, just as he did those first disciples. You might be thinking that I've been very gloomy and pessimistic about the future of the church in this sermon. If it was solely up to us then we would be doomed, but we have not taken into account the nature of our great and awesome God. He loves to confound our expectations. He turns our impossibilities into his opportunities, why, so that the glory goes to Him. There are plenty of examples in the scripture of this principle in action.

We will be looking later in the year at the story of the Exodus. I think the situation in our country today is ripe for God to intervene. I believe that we can confidently expect God to answer this prayer, not for our sake but for the honour of his name. When people look at the church and perceive it weak and declining, they automatically deduce that our God is weak and insignificant.

My friend, Mark Stibbe, has suggested that the account of the coming on the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost is the biblical prototype of revival. As I was preparing for this talk and reading again the familiar passage from Acts, three things struck me about the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Firstly it was **sovereign**. It was not something that was worked up by human initiative. It was something that came down. Its origin was heaven and both its timing and location were determined by God not by man. God's timing is always perfect so I do not regard it as at all surprising that God chose the Day of Pentecost when the Jewish pilgrims would have been bringing in the first fruits of the harvest of the year, to bring in the first harvest of the Christian church.

The second thing to note is that this visitation took place **suddenly**. There was no warning. There was no broadcast from heaven. Even though the disciples were waiting for it as Jesus had told them to, when it actually happened it took them all very much by surprise.

Thirdly, it was without doubt **supernatural**. The actual event could not be, and cannot be, explained away by psychologists or sociologists. It's clear that Luke is lost to find words that adequately describe this dramatic experience. The best that he can come up with is poetic similes. So he says that what descended on the disciples looked like tongues of fire, and what swept through the building sounded like the blowing of a violent wind. What is absolutely clear is that the manifest presence of God was tangible in an extraordinary way.

The results were both **significant** and **spectacular**. The 120 disciples who were filled with the Holy Spirit, spoke spontaneously of the wonders of God in unlearned foreign languages, and then, as a result of Peter's bold preaching, reaped a massive harvest of 3000 new believers. And that was only the

beginning. The church went from strength to strength in the immediate aftermath of Pentecost.

O for such a revival today. I will be preaching a series of sermons on the theme of revival. I am extremely excited to see what God is going to do amongst us. Let us not write the church in this country off as a hopeless case because I know that God hasn't.