

Sermon – Black Cat

While on holiday last week I received this text from Bishop Rachel –

“Just enjoying a late breakfast in the Black Cat before going for a walk. Wonderful! I hope you and Liz are well...”

The church’s investment in The Old Woolhouse last year is 100% supported by +Rachel who sees it – as I do - as a superb, God-given example of a mission-focused church engaging with the community of which it is a part and for which it exists. It is the most exciting project I’ve been involved with in my ministry and I hope it will enthuse more and more members of the church and community over the coming months.

A week next Saturday – 17th March from 10am to 12noon – we will be hosting our first ‘community morning’ in the café when anyone can come along and meet the Directors and staff, ask questions about its foundation and begin to share ideas for how the café can contribute to the wider life of the town. This morning I want to use this sermon to explain more about how the Black Cat fits into the mission of the church – and I’m going to begin by putting it into the broadest of contexts.

The Church of England is in the midst of a revolution that in time will sit alongside the arrival of Columba, the Synod of Whitby, the Reformation, the Oxford Movement and the 19th century evangelical revival as one of the great landmarks in the evolution of our faith in these lands. Now that is a pretty big claim and so what is the nature of this revolution?

In short, it has three characteristics. First, the rediscovery of our church buildings as community assets as well as sacred places. You will know of my enthusiasm for community use of this amazing building and how much that has grown these past few years. Secondly, the end of clericalism and the emergence of a church led by the laity, and enabled by the clergy, rather than a church led by the clergy and assisted by the laity. You can see evidence of this in my desire to delegate, draw new people into the life of the church and not be the 'owner' of everything. The days of Father knows best have gone. And the third characteristic, of which the Black Cat is a part, is the full immersion of our churches in our communities, not elevated above and apart from them, but living and operating at their heart, inclusive of all, transparent in all our workings and no longer under the control of an established, social elite.

This is a revolution, and it probably began in the post war years as the church began to discover its financial vulnerability. Since then the decline in congregations and the wider decline in Anglican allegiance, the crushing impact of placing financial responsibility for church finance and especially clergy pensions upon the parishes, the decline in vocations not helped by a stipend settlement that causes many stipend-receiving clergy households to rely on state benefits (including us for the first two years of my ministry), the increase in multi-parish benefices so that today they are the norm, not the exception – all of these trends are part of the same revolution that is fundamentally changing the place of the church in the national psyche and turning up the resource pressures on local church congregations to almost breaking point.

Yet alongside all of these challenges there are some amazing good news stories, for faith in God is far from on the wane. Increasingly the church is recognising how the Holy Spirit is working outside the parameters of the institutional church to encourage faith. And this is encouraging churches up and down the country to live faith differently in imaginative and diverse ways. The gifting of the Black Cat by a non-Christian to the church is surely evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

The acquisition of the Black Cat shifts our understanding of what church is about. This beautiful church building will never, I trust, cease to be a place of public worship and private devotion, but it will increasingly be a venue for the community at large to use – just as it was in the middle ages. The Black Cat also represents a shift in the missional centre of gravity in the life of our church. Instead of expecting people to come to the church building to experience and learn about faith, the Black Cat now offers us the opportunity to take faith into the marketplace.

As our inherited notions of church mould into something new, new life will begin to emerge – if we trust in the Holy Spirit. It is so exciting, but it is also so challenging, to see these national trends and issues working themselves out in such a small community as Northleach.

The opportunity of the Black Cat encourages us to begin examining our understanding of what it means to live our life as a Christian.

If we look at Jesus' ministry and explore how he divided his time between the synagogue and the marketplace we see a clear bias

towards the later. Yes, Jesus did meet people in the synagogues from time to time especially to debate with religious leaders, but more often he was to be found in the street, by the well, on the road, by a lake, in someone's house, in the middle of a garden. We must never confuse the sacredness of our churches as the sole location of our Christian discipleship; the care of souls takes place where people live, work and relax, not in church alone. And we come to church to be empowered, nourished, and equipped for the rest of our week, out there in the world. The whole point of this service of holy communion is to be prepared for what comes next when we leave. The church may have a sanctuary, but the church isn't of itself a retreat from the world. Think of it more as a fuel store to energise us for what is to come. The real business of the church – if we are to follow in Jesus' footsteps – takes places when we leave - out there in the world.

The church – people as well as building - witnesses to the love of God by responding to that love by helping to bring about his Kingdom of justice and peace. Words like mission and evangelism all come down to this central point – we are witnesses to the presence of God in our lives and in our world, and our role is to enable others to see and experience that for themselves.

The different ways we do this are so numerous it becomes almost impossible to list them. If you are involved in caring for this building, you are a witness. If you are involved in welcoming visitors, you are a witness. If you are involved in the life of our church school, you are a witness. If you are a member of the Mothers' Union, you are a witness. If you sit on the PCC or any of our many, many committees, you are a witness. If you are a member of the sacristy team, you are a witness. If you take your faith into your workplace – school, office,

shop, you are a witness. If you are involved in the Black Cat Café, yes, you too are a witness.

Now I don't have to like or even agree with all the activities a church or church member is involved with, to recognise the importance of their role in witnessing to the love of God - but it is important that we respect the diversity that is amongst us. To fail to do that, is to fail to love and respect God, for each one of us and our callings is made in God's own image.

As you know I wasn't able to attend Rosemary Sly's funeral but I did ask Roger Morris for a copy of his address in advance. I was delighted and amused to read that Roger had during the 1990s experimented with moving the chairs in the nave so that they faced one another – just as I did 18 months ago with mixed results. But what really struck me was the Spirit in which Rosemary had accepted this innovation – although it wasn't really to her personal liking. That's God's grace at work.

Taking risks is fundamental to the life of the church and it always has been; the gift of Jesus being the greatest risk of all. So we must take risks if we are to be faithful witnesses. It's in our DNA as Christians.

As yet I don't know how the Black Cat will evolve as a focus for our ministry and mission, but I do know it is right and worth the risk. And I sincerely believe that the Holy Spirit remains the driving force behind it. Amen.



FACT SHEET

The Old Woolhouse, including the Black Cat, was a **gift** to the church for the benefit of the community.

The building is owned by a social enterprise company called the **Northleach Church and Town Enterprise CIC**. This company is not a charity.

Under its Articles of Association, the company:

- Is wholly owned by Northleach PCC
- Cannot pay its Directors

The company has four core objectives:

1. to operate ethically as an employer and local trader
2. to provide café and community space to meet the needs of the whole community, especially the most disadvantaged
3. to provide a visible presence for the local church in the town market-place
4. to generate healthy profits so as to be able to re-invest in church and community organisations and activities that help residents directly, especially the young, families and other vulnerable groups.

Everyone who works at the café is paid and above the minimum wage.

The company is not yet registered for VAT but will do so in due course.

The café actively supports other traders in the town, preferring to pay higher rates for goods available locally compared with paying invisible food miles to achieve lower prices.

Northleach PCC has invested £45,000 in the Black Cat, netting the church an improvement in its asset base of over £350,000.

