

## **Resourcing Renewal: towards a mission shaped congregation**

*These were open meetings for everyone at Chislehurst Methodist Church in the Church as together we seek God's renewal of the Church through our refurbishment scheme.*

Monday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2008 8.00pm to 9.30pm

### **What is the Church? images of Church in the New Testament**

Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> December 2008 8.00pm to 9.30pm

### **The Church as an expression of the Incarnation: Images of Christ**

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> February 2009 8.00pm to 9.30pm

### **The Church at Worship**

Maundy Thursday

### **The Church as the Crucified and Risen Body of Christ**

Monday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2009, 8.00pm to 9.30pm

### **The Church in Society today**

As we embarked on the long process of refurbishing the church, we recognised the need to root ourselves spiritually and prayerfully in what the church is.

The New Testament does not give us a definition of the Church but various writers do offer images, metaphors and ideas about how they see the Church.

In the first session, we looked at some of these together, and reflected on what they have to say to us today in our own situation.

This is the most fruitful way in which to engage with scripture. We reflect on what images the New Testament writers use and what experiences led them to think in this way.

Then, we ask : what living images is God offering us today which will help us to become more truly the Church – and how do we give expression to this in our buildings and what goes on inside them?

We don't need to be bible experts to learn how to read scripture and how to allow scripture to offer God's living word today. But we do need to listen for God's voice, without bringing too many prejudices and presuppositions which may just manage to prevent us from hearing God's living word.

Everyone is welcome to join in this exciting journey of faith!

\*\*\* Each of the following pieces is a summary of the meeting, containing both the initial input and the discussion that followed, sometimes in groups and sometimes all together.

## ***1. What is the Church? Images of Church in the New Testament,***

There are 57 images of 'church' in the New Testament. We looked only at 6 of these. We were reminded that we would not find a simple, straightforward picture, let alone a definition of church. These were early, exploring days, long before life in the church became settled and institutional. Jesus himself did not found a church so much as a movement of people, called to follow his way of life, the way to God. In the variety of documents which make up the New Testament, there is a wider range of images than we could look at, including sheep, bride, vineyard. Each image can set our imagination free to explore what God wants the church to be like. In pairs, people studied a short passage with its embedded image and brought back to the group their thoughts:

**The church as a building, 1 Corinthians 6.19, Ephesians 2. 19-22:** in the bible, a building image is used with reference to the temple. In the history of the church, another ancient image has also been used, synagogue. The church is both the house for God (temple) and the house for the people of God (synagogue). These two images represent the worship of God and the teaching of the church.

**How can we express both the holy space for God and the people place for fellowship and learning?**

**The mission of the church, Mark 6. 6b-12; Luke 10. 1-9:** the passages about Jesus sending out the 12 and the 70 suggest that the church is organised and strategic in its mission. It is going out, always on the move, seeking new ways of sharing the news of God's kingdom. In this mission, it is called to be culturally sensitive, respecting what others have to offer, valuing those things which are significant to other people.

**How do we engage in sensitive but positive mission in the mixed society of today?**

**The church as people, 1Peter 2. 9-10; Acts 2. 44-47:** God calls people to join the people of God, not as an elitist group but as the inheritors of God's ancient promises to the people of the Old Testament. The church is a corporate group, all-inclusive – though in practice Methodism soon lost touch with its working class origins, simply by becoming more educated.

**How can we become a more representative group of people, fully inclusive, as God calls us to be?**

**The church as a place of reconciliation, 2 Corinthians 5. 17-20:** we are a people whom God has reconciled to him/herself. Therefore we are called to be reconciled with each other in the church and to be reconcilers within human society. Sometimes 'religion' is a cause of conflict, but, as in Northern Ireland, Christians can also be positive agents of reconciliation.

**How better can we deal with conflict within the congregation, and how do we become agents of reconciliation in our community?**

**The church as a symbol of unity, Ephesians 4. 4-6:** the image of the umbrella expresses the church as an inclusive place for all people; the symbol of the football team, made up of people from many nationalities, shows how different people can unite for a shared common enterprise. Yet the church is often disunited and therefore becomes less effective in its mission and fails to reflect the unity of God, the holy trinity.

**How can we be more inclusive and clearer about our living purpose as the people of God?**

**The church as body, Romans 12. 4-8; I Corinthians 12. 12-13:** the church is the body of Christ. The image of the human body (body, mind and soul) is a powerful reminder of how inter-connected we are, each depending on the other if we are to grow into maturity. Every part of the body is important; together we seek a coherence, a working effectively together. A danger for the church, like the modern human body, might be that we seek mere longevity (let's keep the church alive a bit longer, let's perpetuate what we are now) rather than seeking the renewal of the resurrection.

**How do we keep the body, which is the church, healthy and alive, without seeking merely a continued existence?**

These varied images often overlapped and had much in common.

They show the church to be a corporate body rather than just a collection of individuals.

They show that our unity comes from God, and our purpose is fulfilled in the power of God's Spirit.

They show the church to be looking outside herself, less self-preoccupied, seeking rather to be the presence of the kingdom of God in God's world.

In the life of Jesus, we see a glimpse of the fullness of the kingdom of God, and now we await – and seek and work for – the fullness of God's kingdom for all creation: 'Thy kingdom come on earth as in heaven'.

**What dream of 'church' do we have for Chislehurst Methodist Church as we seek God's renewal?**

**Images of Christ: the church as an expression of the incarnation**

Each of the four gospels paints a different portrait of Jesus of Nazareth: in Mark, he is the miracle worker and exorcist, rushing from place to place; in Matthew, he is the teacher of how his followers should live; in Luke, we have the prophet who journeys to Jerusalem, both as teacher and as risen Lord; in John, we see God incarnate walking the pages of human history.

The following centuries saw the rise and fall and rise again of icons of Christ, along with icons of a whole range of biblical scenes and saints. These icons of Christ also paint different pictures: in many, he is Christ pantocrator, ruling as creator and lord; in others, he the saviour; in later icons, he is the child with his mother Mary; in some early ones, he is Christ painted 'without human hands', reflecting the legend that his face was impressed on a handkerchief used by Veronica to wipe his face on the way to the cross.

None of these (bible or icon) really presumes to have a human likeness of the face of Jesus of Nazareth. The artist always expresses Jesus as a reflection of the artists' age and culture. This is seen clearly in the host of 19<sup>th</sup> century lives of Jesus, properly described as 'reflections of one's own face' seen when looking down the well of 19 hundred years of history in the search for the historical Jesus.

Contemporary pictures have broken the mould of European-looking pictures of Jesus which dominated renaissance art. So, we looked at Jesus not only as a Palestinian but also as a Rasta; Jesus as a black man and also as a woman dying on the cross. Then, we looked at Graham Sutherland's Christ in Glory, Salvador Dali's Christ of St John of the Cross, as well as the face of Christ made up by Ian Johnson from hundreds of ordinary photos taken of ordinary events and ordinary people in one ordinary village.

The point of looking at these images of Christ was to address the questions, in discussion:  
What is my image of Jesus Christ?  
What images do we portray in our worship, week by week?  
What image do we want to offer to our community in a church renewed not only in its buildings but also in its life and witness?

*Creator God,  
in every face we see your love reflected,  
each person is made in your image,  
marked by love and precious to you.  
You have made a world full of diversity,  
where difference is beautiful and your Spirit moves.  
Help us to live free from prejudice;  
that which is used against us  
and that which we bear against other people.  
Help us to recognise the presence of Christ in each person,  
In his name, we pray.  
Amen.*

### ***Resourcing Renewal: The Church at Worship***

In 1986, the Methodist Conference expressed its disquiet at the widespread state of worship. A report was written, *Let the People Worship*. Resourcing Renewal discussed 6 related matters.

1. **why** people come to church, and why most don't. An easy answer is to say that we come to worship God, though in practice there's a whole range of more ordinary, practical answers. But what does it mean to worship God? Perhaps, to glimpse another world (the kingdom of God), perhaps to try to look at life through God's eyes.

2. **who worships:** Traditionally, much of our worship was conducted by ministers or local preachers very much on their own. *Let the People Worship*, as the title suggests, was a plea for greater participation by the whole congregation - beyond singing hymns and reading the lessons – for example, leading the intercessions. There are also wider possibilities through sharing in the preparation of worship, even in the preparation of the sermon, which itself of course might take a more interactive form.
3. **where the worshippers are coming from:** This is not a geographical question, but a recognition that worship needs to reflect the ordinary (as well as sometimes the extraordinary) world which we inhabit day by day, that is, worship should begin where people are: “We come with self-inflicted pains . . .”
4. **believing:** We sing our faith, which is why what hymns we sing is so important. Our worship should be a statement of what we believe and also an occasion for exploring, challenging and deepening our corporate faith, rather than just an occasion for supporting personal belief.
5. **how do we enable a sense of the presence of God?** Hymn 653 (‘Here are symbols to remind us’) draws attention to the importance of symbolism in our church: colour, light, music, seating arrangements . . . These can help us to gaze on God (Hymn 51, v7) and may enable adoration. All worship is sacramental because all life is sacramental. We prepare best by developing a mood of expectancy of God’s presence.
6. **aim:** two-fold: the adoration of God and the transformation of self, of church, and indeed of the whole world, creation itself. That’s why every act of worship concludes with the sending out of God’s people into God’s world, with ‘food for our journey’. Worship leads to mission, God’s mission of justice and peace for all people.

### ***Address, Maundy Thursday, Chislehurst, 2009***

A first symbol - **Passover meal:**

feast of Passover , out of Egypt; in OT, comparable in significance to cross/resurrection in NT; in John, last supper was not Passover meal, but JC crucified at Passover.  
There was no ‘passing over’ for Jesus this Passover.

A second symbol - **foot-washing:**

associated in Christian worship with Maundy Thursday.  
Symbol taken up in Queen’s Maundy money and in foot washing, for example, by pope and archbishop.  
Illustration of one who serves, echoing teaching of JC to disciples.

A third symbol - **betrayal:** Judas and Peter and all disciples

This is our point of entry into the story: we are all familiar with betrayal:

- we betray one another,
- we betray ourselves, defiling the image of God within,
- we betray God, in same way as Judas does.

We are not talking about personal failure only,  
but also about the church crucifying Christ over and over again.

This image of church as crucified body of Christ has two references: namely, as church, we betray G's plan for us, as does all humanity; yet despite our sin, we are invited to share in his being crucified.

It is through sharing in his suffering that we share in his resurrection.

This we cannot do, except through the road of the cross, for this is the only pathway to life with God .

This relates not just to manner in which we accept suffering of illness or bereavement, but to our willingness, as church, to stand along-side suffering of the world.

In its future life, what is this church here to be a symbol of?

- the crucified and risen body of Christ, as in Lord's Supper
- called to be God's symbol of sacrifice & hope for/ in our community

We come tonight to G's table to be fed for this journey

and we shall go out into the darkness of the night as God's light.

### ***The Church in Society today: Towards a mission shaped congregation***

The first three sessions were on images of the church, the church as an expression of the incarnation and the church at worship. These sessions were largely about the church. The final session moves us from what we believe and how we worship to The Church in Society Today. This tends to be a bit contentious because it affects our life-style and social/political action.

For example, we are a fair trade church. This is a very simple outworking of what we believe about God's commitment to justice for all people and God's particular care for the most vulnerable in the world. It is easy for us to mouth these things, but becoming a fair trade church means not only that we use only fair trade products within the life of the church, but also that we carry this practice into our homes as well, seeking out wherever possible goods that have been fairly traded. Where there is a choice, it is a choice between supporting justice or supporting injustice. On one level, very simple; on another level, quite testing of our decision to follow Christ's way.

Another example: we went to an ecumenical service at Westminster Methodist Central Hall as part of the Strangers into Citizens campaign, celebrating the diversity of our society and urging government to allow long term migrants who are in this country without legal papers to become committed citizens, contributing more openly to our society. This might sound wrong to some or just too political to others - though leading figures in every major party support this move - but it does begin to test the willingness of Christians to work out the practical implications of the most elementary things that we believe: God is the God of all people, without discrimination, loving each and deeply committed to establishing the kingdom here on earth.

The gospel lives in conversation with culture. A key question is when to reflect and when to challenge, an issue addressed in Christian apologetics. On the one hand, it is both easy and foolish to condemn 'modern' culture. For if the gospel holds back from its culture, it falls silent. On the other hand, the church must speak/act prophetically. Our role then is both affirming and challenging those who shape society's agenda.

Four examples;

An order of nuns, seeking a new role in a much changed society, have decided to become part of a movement to combat female trafficking.

Paisley Methodist Central Hall, no longer a church for cotton mill workers, or a recreation centre for post war men, opened a Fair Trade shop.

Many rural chapels have closed, not out of failure, but because of radical changes in society.

Walsingham chapel, once the largest and liveliest church in the village until the 20<sup>th</sup> revival of pilgrimage is still open, seeking to play its part in this much changed scene.

At Crediton, the minister and a small group went on a fresh expressions course and as a consequence started a Saturday afternoon Noah's Ark for young families.

How would we characterise modern culture, given that there is no longer any common culture in the UK? Certainly faith (of whatever sort) has become counter cultural. One of clearest marks of our culture is its obsessive individualism, with its consequence of a denial of community values.

Two questions:

What is distinctive about Christian life today? This is a life-style issue.

What is distinctive about 'Church life'? To caricature, Church takes a variety of expression, from high church ritualism, through individualistic evangelicalism, to wishy washy liberalism.

Is there another way forward? Perhaps a post-liberal, biblically based theology which starts with creation rather than salvation, and has a strong dose of liberation and feminist theology, and a mission alongside people without discrimination. This seeks to express God's dream and therefore to work towards the common good. It is grounded in Jesus Christ, a Jew who broke most but not all of the conventions of his religion and society, for the sake of the kingdom of God.

As we seek to be God's instruments in the renewal of the world, the church needs to change also the culture of church life; to move from despair to hope, from a purposeless/goalless existence towards the kingdom of God.