

“Hearing the good news” a sermon preached by Kerry Enright at the evening service at Knox Church Dunedin on Sunday 13 August 2017, the reading from Romans 10:5-15

I know that the truth is often more in the conversation than in the proclamation, more in attending to the consequence of the word than in speaking the word, often in the feelings and responses generated than in the speaking by one person.

So, please take that into account as I speak – and ask God’s Spirit to keep unpacking this word in our lives.

One of the things I struggle to communicate as a minister is what constitutes a church, the dynamics that form a church, what church is.

How we imagine church makes a big difference to what we expect from our life together.

How we imagine church determines what we choose to do and not do.

I also think how we imagine church influences whether it flourishes or dies.

I am talking about a fundamental dynamic, a theological truth, a core belief.

I have heard the church spoken of as if it is like a club or organisation that we need market, to make known, to make relevant, to make attractive, so people will come.

I have heard the church spoken of as if it is like a club or organisation that exists for its members, the members, determine what it is to be like, and their own preferences determine its shape and life.

In a variation of that of that approach, people sometimes speak as if church has a way of being, and we must retain that way of being, so the church must be true to its self-definition. So the individual congregation becomes self-referencing.

I do not believe the church is like an organisation that exists to attract people.

I do not believe the church is like an organisation that needs to be relevant.

I do not believe the church is like an organisation where the members in a particular time determine how it is to be.

The language of being attractive or being relevant or of being true to our particular story is unnecessary, if we understand church as church, formed by the living Christ.

I believe this conversation is really about how we imagine Christ today and how Christ relates to church.

On the one hand we could imagine the Church as an organisation with a founder who left a message and a way of living, and we need to keep remembering in and teaching it. Taking that approach we would spend a lot of time focusing on our past, on the founder, on his followers, on the followers through the ages, and what becomes most important is keeping alive the memory, the stories, the patterns of the past.

Now although that is a component of being church, it is not the major dynamic.

At the heart of our faith is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

The resurrection and ascension affirm that Christ is an ever present reality, an ever present spirit, an ever present presence.

The resurrection and ascension affirm that no tomb can contain Christ. By tomb I include the church or any institution or organisation. The church cannot, does not contain Christ. Christ is loose in the world.

The crucifixion and resurrection happened in a city, not in a church. Christ was set free in a city, not in a church.

These doctrines are statements about who Christ is - a risen Christ, a living Christ, an acting, teaching, reconciling Christ.

A Christ alive in our neighbourhood.

We discover this Christ not by preserving a past but by risking ourselves in faith, to be where he is, to do what he does, to follow as he leads us now.

We cannot discover Christ in the past tense.

Our call is to watch for the presence – the presence of Christ in the world around us, now.

So a spiritual discipline at the centre of being church is discernment –listening, watching, noticing, testing, wondering, conversing, discerning where and how Christ is present in the world around us.

Mark Chamberlain says students come to him offering to help others in the congregation. So he sends them to a person's home to dig their garden, or buy their groceries, or vacuum their house, but he says, when you are done, I want you to come back, and tell me where you sensed, saw, felt, recognised Jesus today.

I believe there is a world of difference between engaging a present Christ, a living Christ, a real spiritual presence in our world, now, whatever we make of that Christ, there is a world of difference between that Christ and approaching Christ as an historic figure whose teaching and values we must try to keep alive.

That world of difference becomes evident in how we are church.

If the Christ is a contemporary Christ, then as soon as we start noticing a loss of a generation in our churches, it suggests we are in danger of losing contact with a living Christ.

Of course there is more to it than that – we are dealing in our nation with post-christendom. And it is not the society around us that defines who we are, or determines what we should do. I am not at all suggesting that.

But if we are listening to the Christ in our neighbourhood, if we are following the Christ in our neighbourhood, then it is inevitable that we will always be evolving because that Christ is always contemporary, of these generations, the eternal now.

If we are listening to Christ amid the culture of our age, then we will not get trapped in practices and ways that limit us to a particular era or pattern from the past, or to our own preferences and likes.

The moment the church stops being cross-generational if the community is cross-generational, or the moment the church stops being cross-cultural if the community is cross-cultural, or the moment the church starts being more like an island, then we need to ask – have we begun to lose contact with the risen Christ?

This living Christ is enough in himself, because he is a revivifying, renewing, constantly reshaping, constantly evolving presence, and if we are in prayer with that Christ and discerning that Christ, then we evolve and change.

What then of church?

The Church is church when it participates in what God is doing in our world, when it is pointing to the presence of Christ in the world.

The Church is the church, when it seeks to embody what it knows of Christ in the world, and when it is practising and learning the process of discernment.

We cannot participate in the life of Christ alone – we do it in community.

That is one reason we gather, to discern the presence of Christ together so we can act with the living Christ in the world.

I cannot begin to explore all the implications of this understanding – they are many.

I called this sermon about hearing the good news, and so what we are called to do, among other things, is to hear good news in the community around us, the good news of Jesus Christ, to be part of it as we are able.

If that is so, questions of relevance or attractiveness become unnecessary, because in the living Christ we are always communicating, engaging, dialoguing with the community around us, because we are looking for Christ.

The question before us is always - do we have the courage to be a church of the risen Christ with all the unpredictability that involves?

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growing in courage to live the Jesus way



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