

Holy, holy, holy

In their bid to be as attractive as possible, many churches these days seem to go out of their way to be as informal, warm, laid back, friendly and undemanding as possible!

The fear seems to be that unless the local church is seen to be "modern", in tune with the mood and expectations of the times we live in, then all will be lost, with the dread words "boring" and "out of touch" being tossed their way as the punters go off to somewhere more to their liking.

From this there can easily develop a sort of unhealthy leap-frog between local churches, each one striving to outdo its neighbours - in the nicest possible way of course! - in being deemed the hottest place to be. The old virtue of loyalty seems to have largely disappeared, with worshippers chopping and changing their church allegiance depending on their current requirements, and on the chat amongst the church-involved mums at the school gate.

All sides lose out when things get to that stage - notably the Lord Himself. Of course any local church must be mindful of, and sensitive to, the people in its area, in the way it sets about its various tasks. But there is rather more to it than that. The church is not there merely to "give people a good time", and so keep the numbers up and the bills being paid.

Did the various Christian congregations in the earliest years of the Church set their sights on "how can we get people to come?". Not a bit of it. We can be sure that "gossiping the Gospel" was a widespread and entirely natural habit for our Christian forebears as they went about their daily lives. Alongside this natural proclamation of Christian truths outsiders could see before their very eyes that **God was at work!**

There were amazing healings. There were great clashes between Christian leaders and the religious and civic authorities - with those naming the name of Christ coming out on top. There were lives being radically changed - lives steeped in paganism, the occult, idolatry, promiscuity, being turned to Christ and becoming something beautiful in consequence. Above all the Church was seen to mean it - convinced, confident, brave, purposeful and single-minded. The notion that the churches in those times were fiddling about trying to get people to come is a nonsense.

And at the heart of all this was Christian worship - the worship of Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in spirit and in truth by His gathered people. No gimmicks, no eye on the numbers, indeed, not even any deliberate "mission" as such - just every eye on the Lord in His glory. When the Lord Himself is truly the focus, things happen.

"Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty, who was, and is and is to come" - summed up that worship, always keeping to the forefront that crucial awareness of God's **utter holiness**. We do well to look through the meticulous instructions

given by the Lord to Moses, especially in Exodus and Leviticus, concerning the tabernacle, the priests and the people. Thanks be to God that by Christ's shed blood we are now free from the customs and demands of the old Law - but we are not free one jot from the need still to approach the Lord with deep reverence, awe, "fear" in the old sense of that word, and humility. As we do that we can keep in mind that we can so approach Him only through the shed blood of the Lord Jesus (eg Hebrews 10.19-22).

So the message is a simple one, and an ancient one: the need for the local church to stay focussed on the Lord Himself in all His holy glory. Get that focus right, and keep that focus right, and all other things will fall into their proper and valid place. This frees a local church from the competitive, market-place mentality, where its activities become dominated by the fear of being thought of as out-of-step, dull or uncool.

For, first and foremost, the Church is to be pleasing to the Lord God, worshipping and serving Him in spirit and in truth, long before it is to be pleasing to the world in which it is set.

I Corinthians 15.57.

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