

Smaller Churches Celebration Sermon 13<sup>th</sup> May 2025

**Ezekiel 36:24-28**

**John 14: 1-7, 15-17**

It is our privilege to live in Easter times. I don't just mean the season we currently celebrate, the Easter season, I mean, in the time after the death and resurrection of Jesus.

I know that sometimes, I forget this; is it just me, or do you sometimes forget too?

Forget that being Easter people means that we live in the certainty of all things having been resolved, of light triumphing over dark, of good triumphing over evil. Not that these things *might* happen, but that they are a given.

Why do we so easily forget this? I am sure there are as many answers to that question as people here tonight. For me I think it comes down to loss of perspective and trying to do God's job for him.

When I put myself at the centre of the picture, I feel overwhelmed, then I feel hope might be lost. I have to remember that this is a story of all people in all time, and it is God in charge, not me.

Being Easter people means that we are, people of Hope. People for whom hope is a given, even when we don't easily feel it.

The hope that is set before us is an absolute promise, a covenant with God.

We recognise Hope as one of the three great virtues, along with Faith and Love.

Reflecting on Hope recently I was introduced to a poem by a French poet *Charles Peguy [Pe-gee]* who describes Faith, Hope and Love, translated as Charity, as three female characters.

Faith as a faithful wife, Charity an ardent mother, and Hope as a tiny child.

Imagine, Faith and Love as solid dependable women, on the road, walking forward with, quiet dignity and Hope as a small, enthusiastic child (like Masie) who scampers around, drawing the attention of Faith and Love to signs all around them, and running ahead and back, to encourage them forward.

Is this how you see Hope .... Or tired and old??

There is no more point in interrogating this precious child Hope about how things will turn out, than there would be in interrogating any small child about what they will be like when they are grown up.

We can only wait with patience as the picture unfolds before us and delight as we see promise fulfilled and unexpected treasures emerge.

Hope is not the warm and fuzzy feeling that we have when we can see how, it is all going to turn out alright. Christian hope is the ground beneath our feet. It is the vastness of God's promise that lasts from here to eternity. We can only experience true Hope when we connect ourselves into that promise and put our roots down.

Smaller Churches matter because they create a network of church life that helps us to connect. They keep hope alive and call people to childlike curiosity.

Back in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century Christian communities were recognised by their mutual love, 'See how those Christians love one another' people would say. Is this what they say of us now?

This is not just how each of us loves those around us, but how each church learns to love and cherish its sister churches.

How many churches are there in the world? One!

One, In the same way as there is one human race that is beautiful in its diversity, made in the image of God. So too, there is one church, also beautiful in its diversity. Many of you have heard me talk before about 'one church many rooms'.

We need to stop thinking as if each church were a thing. Each church, each local church, is a part of a glorious whole.

Why would Jesus have promised many dwelling places in heaven if there wasn't room for diversity? We don't need to all be the same, but we do need to all be one.

The idea of all being part of one church in the world, founded by Jesus, doesn't generally challenge us too much, we happily nod to that, because it doesn't ask anything of us.

Being one church locally, in our benefice, is actually much more challenging.

What does it look and feel like? It looks like every one of us caring about all of the churches equally and working together to help each of them flourish.

It doesn't look like them all being the same or having equal call on limited resources.

It looks like working together for the care of souls not just in our own parish, but in the benefice, because when we work together, the task is both more manageable and more enjoyable.

We are seeing this at work in the Muddy Boot Rural Mission Area where they are learning to let go and share in their ministry across their 27 churches and finding the more they share, and help each other, the more they all benefit.

So some final reflections. Let me begin by saying, when one stands in a pulpit one is almost always preaching to the converted! The task here is not to convince you but to help you articulate to those who are not here what needs to be worked on together.

My first point is to say, please remember we 'the diocese' are all one. The phrase 'the diocese' is usually used to mean those who work in the Diocesan and Senior Staff offices.

Nothing has upset me more in my work of trying to support you, than when people have accused 'The Diocese' of wanting to do them harm or of being profligate. It is nonsense. There is no one who wants anything but the best for all our churches. We are always all on the same side.

My second point is to celebrate the joy of the topsy turvy world of being a Christian. There are times when worldly logic might say one thing and the opposite is true in God's economy. The more we share, the more we give away, the more we discover we have. Trusting this to be true takes real nerve. Listen to the prophets amongst you who encourage you in this way and dance with the child of Hope.

Finally, trust in God. Start by imagining that everything that is happening is according to God's purpose. If God wanted our churches to be full of people and our coffers to be full of money, they would be.

We are where we are now, with God. We need to let go and let God. Let God show us His purpose. Let God show us His way.

I have seen some remarkable examples of where the very weakest and most fragile of our churches have been reborn into something new and exciting, and it has only happened when the people of those churches have finally said this isn't working, we need to let go and let something new grow.

It has been an enormous privilege to work with you for the last five years. Your commitment, your resilience, your enthusiasm and most of all your love for the communities you serve, is wonderful. During the next hymn you will receive a small gift.

A word of scripture, a token of love and some seeds.

I hope that you will enjoy taking the seeds back to your church and planting them, in the ground or in a pot and as they grow, [I hope they do] I hope they will be a reminder to you that even if you are a smaller church you are part of and connected in to a body of brothers and sisters that reach right around the globe, and backwards and forwards in time, who, with God's anointing, have the power to do anything God wills.

Thank you for being you, and for letting me be me, and God be God.