

Sermon: 20.8.17-Trinity X-2017

“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” St Matthew 18.20

An old man was sitting in his room, with a book on his lap. A little boy, four years old, comes in and says: “What are you doing?” The man says “I’m saying Evening Prayer.” The boy replies: “Whatever will you say next!?” The old man was a Franciscan priest, Fr Dennis, visiting the family of an old school friend of mine; the little boy was his big brother. Their mother would delight to tell me this story from time to time when she heard about my intended path in life, and this tiny cameo of faithfulness has been both an encouragement and also a salutary reminder for me of part of what comprises the duty of all bishops, priests and deacons: the daily pattern of morning and evening prayer.

For those of us in parish ministry however, the “curate” of the Prayer Book, in other words, the one with a ‘cure of souls’, there is more to it than this: the curate, that is the parish priest, must *“cause a bell to be tolled thereunto a convenient time before he begin that the people may come to hear God’s Word, and to pray with him.”* Why must the Curate do this? As ever, the answer is to be found in the BCP....

At the very front of the BCP there is a section entitled *Concerning the Service of the Church*. It follows directly after the *Preface* and is well worth a read. It closes with the following firm injunction:

“All Priests and Deacons are to say daily the Morning and Evening Prayer either privately or openly, not being let by sickness, or some other urgent cause. And the curate that ministereth in every Parish Church....being at home, and not being otherwise reasonably hindered, shall say the same in the Parish Church....and shall cause a bell to be tolled thereunto a convenient time before he begin, that the people may come to hear God’s Word, and to pray with him.” *Concerning the Service of the Church, 1662*

This matter isn’t just for the priest alone, but he is responsible for making it possible for the people to hear the Word of God and to pray together. Now, you may argue, this was of course written in the 16th C. when literacy levels were low and few people would have owned a Bible; and lots of people now live beyond earshot of the bell of their parish church. For some years I regularly used to ring a church bell and apart from the people in the old manor house next door I always had a suspicion that the only other hearers in the parish were the sheep in the field opposite....and then there is the nagging feeling that this time might be spent more productively, achieving something-possibly a dreaded “measurable outcome”....But can you imagine the difference it would make if every one of us on an electoral roll in the Church of England made it our duty, part of our rule of life, *just once a week* to come and join with others in a church close to our home, and hear God’s Word and pray together? Apart from the Sunday Masses, there are 20 services each week in this parish; our electoral roll is about 120. Taking account of those who live a distance away, that’s about five of us at each service. What an exciting thought!!

Never mind being king for a day: if I were the Archbishop of Canterbury for a day I would simply ask the Church of England to do what it is there to do, and to try doing this for a year, and then see how we get on with tackling all the great challenges that surround us, both in the Church and in the world. *This* would take the form of ensuring that each church building is open all day every day, and that the bell in each church is rung morning and evening, to call people to hear the Word of God and to pray.

The BCP asserts that when we do this, when we hear the Word of God and pray together we *“profit more and more in the knowledge of God”*, and are *“inflamed with the love of his true Religion.”* Of course our Lord recognized that, for the most part, these gatherings would be small: I believe that he was consciously encouraging his followers not to lose heart when he said *“For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”* That’s how it is most of the time, and that’s alright: because he is here, in the midst of us, with us until the end of time. Amen.