

A Holy Community : Our Mission

Diocese in Europe Archdeaconry of Gibraltar Synod

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I would like to thank you for the invitation to be with you this morning. My brief is to talk about 'community', the synod's theme. Did you notice that when I was being introduced Nathan asked me 'Who are you?' and 'What do you do?'. There're quite good questions if you want to get to know someone. They are also good questions to ask of any community. Good questions to ask, for example, if you want to know what we are doing here today. We have come from Spain, Portugal and North Africa because we belong to communities that belong to the Church of England's Diocese in Europe. But who are we? And what do we do?

Now, you may already have your own ideas about how to answer these questions. Your church may even have developed some sort of 'mission statement' that tries to capture the response. Without necessarily seeking to undermine any of that, this morning I want us to see what answers the Scriptures suggest. Let's remind ourselves of the questions: 'Who are you?' and 'What do you do?'.

We don't have to look very far to find an answer to these questions. In St Peter's first letter to an early Christian community he tells them they are

a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that [they] may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called [them] out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Peter 2.9 NRSV).

This answer also applies to us as Christian communities at the other end of the Mediterranean two millennia later. Who are you? We are a chosen people. We are a royal priesthood. We are a holy nation. We are God's own people. What do you do? We proclaim the mighty acts of God.

It's fairly straightforward, isn't it? But if, when we return to our churches, someone asks us what we have learnt about community during these few days we might wish that we had looked at this answer of St Peter's in a little more detail. So that is what we will do, starting with the first question, 'Who are you?'

Who are you?

St Peter's affirmation that Christian communities are a royal priesthood and a holy nation does not come out of thin air. He is alluding to a much older part of Scripture in the book of Exodus. In Chapter 19 we read that Moses goes up a mountain to talk with God. On Mount Sinai God instructs him to tell Israel the following:

you have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation (Exodus 19.4-6).

I would like to highlight three things in this passage. First, notice that God is God. This is the basis for everything that we read in these verses. God is God and all the earth is his. Sometimes this seems just like so much hot air. In our work it's the boss who calls the tune. In our household finances it's the Chancellor of the Exchequer who decides taxes and interest rates—or our children who run up large mobile phone bills! In the place where we live it's the local authorities. But this is simply not true. God is God: he is above all and in charge. It's for this reason, states Exodus, that he chooses a people for himself.

The second thing to highlight is that God's choosing a people for himself comes before the demand that people live in a certain way. Put another way, 'grace comes first'. Now perhaps this doesn't sound quite right to some of you. Perhaps you are accustomed to a distinction that goes something like this: in the Old Testament one has to gain God's approval by obeying the law, whilst in the New Testament God in his love reaches out to people in grace. Now, there *is* a difference between the Old Testament and the New Testament. But this is not it; because the grace of God comes first in *both* testaments. Before they even know about the Ten Commandments God saves the Israel-

ites from oppressive slavery in Egypt. And the Israelites know this. “You have *seen*,” says God, “what I *did* to the Egyptians, and how I *bore* you on eagle’s wings and *brought* you to myself” (Exodus 19.4). All this has already happened. Exodus speaks of a rescue completed, not simply promised. God first saves and then calls people to live the right way. This is the order is both Old and New Testaments. It’s Good News. It was Good News for ancient Israelites. And it is Good News for us, too, as people belonging to communities this side of the New Testament.

The third thing we need to observe is that there is a very good reason for God choosing a people, a reason that takes us to the heart of the answer to our question ‘who are you?’. Remember that the choice of Israel is linked to the fact that the whole earth is God’s. If we go back right to the beginning of the Bible we read that of Adam and Eve’s disobedience and subsequent expulsion from the garden of Eden. This account is included in the Scriptures to explain the breach of communion between God and people. It explains how sin has made the world ugly, dangerous and violent. There’s a lot of writing between that text and ours, but they are closely connected, because the choice of Old Testament Israel was God’s initial solution to the consequences of that first human choice to go it alone without him.

Note that Israel will be God’s “treasured possession out of all the peoples” (Exodus 19.5). This sounds like they have been chosen for some special privileges. But, in fact, Israel will be treasured because this people have a special job to do that arises from God’s concern for the *whole* of his creation. They are special because they have a special mission. Verse 6 reads, “the whole earth is mine, but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom”. If we understand what this means we will have an answer to the question ‘who are you?’.

It’s fairly obvious what a kingdom is, and in any case, since it is Israel that is to be addressed it is not difficult to conclude that Israel, the Old Testament people of God, is the kingdom in view. St Peter, of course, uses the same terminology to refer to the Church, the New Testament people of God of whom we are the spiritual heirs. But what do we make of the fact that the people of God are a ‘*priestly* kingdom’? A priest is someone who stands in the middle between two parties as an intermediary. Moses himself embodies the priestly role in Exodus 19. Note how he rushes from one party to another. At one moment he is listening to God. The next he talks with the people. Then he returns to talk with God. Then he returns to the peo-

ple. (It all sounds quite tiring—like leading a church!) This is the key: his role is to represent God to the people, and represent the people to God. So when God chooses *this* people to be a *priestly* people what he has in mind is this sort of role vis-à-vis the other peoples of the world. A priestly people represents God to the world. That’s who we are, then—God’s representatives. Another word would be ‘ambassadors’.

St Paul makes this explicit in his letter to the Romans where he describes his role as being a “minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God” (Romans 15.16). He conceived his ministry of evangelism, of announcing the Good News, as one of representing God and what he had done in Jesus Christ as that of being a priest. At another point St Paul and his helper, Timothy, say that they are

Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20)

This is the role of a priestly people. And although it may be important to clarify that everyone has access to God through Jesus alone, with no need for a human intermediary, *as a community* the Scriptures tell us that the answer to the question ‘Who are you?’ is that we are a priestly people: we are charged with representing God in Jesus to the world.

Before proceeding to think about the second question, ‘What do you do?’ I would like us to reflect on this Scriptural truth by praising God together. I am not going to talk about the content of our message to the world, so we shall take this opportunity to remind ourselves that a priestly community speaks words of encouragement to the world. Words that call everyone to recognise that God is God, and worship Him. The hymn ‘All people that on earth do dwell’ encapsulates our message; our ambassadorial call. Let us sing:

All people that on earth do dwell,
Sing to the Lord with cheerful voice.
Him serve with mirth, His praise forth tell;
Come ye before Him and rejoice.

The Lord, ye know, is God indeed;
Without our aid He did us make;
We are His folk, He doth us feed,
And for His sheep He doth us take.

O enter then His gates with praise;
Approach with joy His courts unto;
Praise, laud, and bless His Name always,
For it is seemly so to do.

For why? the Lord our God is good;
His mercy is for ever sure;
His truth at all times firmly stood,
And shall from age to age endure.

To Father, Son and Holy Ghost,
The God Whom Heaven and earth adore,
From men and from the angel host
Be praise and glory evermore.

What do you do?

We come, then, to our second question, 'What do you do?'. The answer that St Peter gives is that we are a community that 'proclaims the mighty acts of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light'. There are two aspects of St Peter's words to which I would like to draw your attention. First, we need to *know* who it is that has called us. Second, we need to *announce* what He has done.

As Christians we are accustomed to say that we know God, through his Son, Jesus. Let's think a little about this. I was struck the first time that I heard some Spanish friends oblige their young son to recite the cradle-song 'Jesucito de mi vida'. For those who are not familiar with it, it goes like this:

Jesucito de mi vida, tu eres niño como yo.
Por eso te quiero tanto, y te doy mi corazón.

(Little Jesus of my life, you're a child like me.
So I love you so much, and I give you my heart.)

This is not simply doggerel; it's profound theology. It tells the truth that Jesus became like one of us. Once he identified with us, and now he can and does identify with us. But what's wrong with it? What's the problem with teaching children that Jesus is a child just like them? ... He never grows up. He never becomes a man who ministered powerfully, healing the sick and bringing Good News to the poor. He never becomes a man who took upon himself the sins of the world, died, rose again, who is now reigning in heaven, and who will come again in glory. Keeping Jesus as a child, or as a corpse on a cross, or dead, again in the arms of his mother, is characteristic of much Iberian Christianity. It is not that these aspects of Jesus' life did not happen. But they were not the only events; they are not the whole story.

And here lies the challenge for us, as communities and individuals. Last autumn I was talking to a Church of England vicar and Rural Dean. We were discussing the challenges of ministry and leadership. One of the metaphors he used to describe his own vision of the priestly ministry was a safari leader. If you have been on safari you will know that things are not

quite as simple as the natural history programmes make it appear. The African savannah is huge; but the animals are very small. The result is that they are difficult to find. The task of the safari leader, therefore, is to guide the group to the lions so that they can take their pictures. To do this the safari leader must have one very special qualification: he himself must know the lion. He must know when they sleep and when they hunt. He must know where they like to go and how to get there. And he must know what to do so as not to provoke the lion so that it becomes dangerous.

This is a metaphor for the role of a priest does: he leads the people as close as possible to the lion of Judah. It is here, of course, that the importance of having a correct knowledge of Jesus comes to the fore. If we have created God in our own image we will present a tame Jesus, a 'Lord' to whom we will have no problem directing others, but someone who is not, in fact, the Lord. He will be a stunted Jesus, instead of the living Lord who challenges and saves. He will be, to put things in feline terms, more of a pussy cat than a wild lion. But, as C. S. Lewis remarked, the Lion is not tame. It is important, then, to include all the biblical witness to God; to know and tell the whole story about Jesus, both as individuals and as communities.

All this has a lesson for us, today, as leaders of the Christian communities in which we are involved. It helps us arrive at an answer to our question 'What do you do?': We must spend time and effort getting to *know* God, both as individuals and communities. I'm not talking about technique, nor even about routines, rather *knowing* Jesus. St Paul was having a difficult time and was being persecuted for his faith. Misunderstood and facing adversity he wrote to Timothy saying "I know the one in whom I have put my trust" (2 Timothy 1.12). He wasn't secure in the knowledge of the 4 steps to salvation. He didn't count on his years of theological training, or on having been baptized in the Church of England, or in reading the Bible at 5.30 every morning. All these things may help; but they are not the same as knowing Jesus and choosing Him everyday, rather than taking the easy way out, because, like St Paul, we know him.

I said that as well as *knowing* who has called us we need to *announce* what God has done. The passage from Exodus 19 to which I referred at the beginning speaks of *how* this proclamation will occur: by the people of God being a 'holy nation'. This is another somewhat technical phrase that will repay a little attention.

How do you know what someone is like? By what they say? When a second-hand car salesman tells you

that he is 'a man of honour', do you believe him? Not usually! So can you tell what someone is like by the way they dress? Does a smart suit or a string of pearls indicate trustworthiness, but jeans and trainers a more dubious morality? Again, we all know that appearance is an unreliable indicator of character. But what about actions? Although hypocrisy is an ever present danger, what people do is usually a better indicator of character than what people say or what they look like. It's the same with communities. When Moses is told to tell Israel they are a 'holy nation' God has in mind not so much that they separate themselves from all the other nations, rather that they behave as He would act if He were a nation. In other words, that His people reflect in their lives together the fact that they *are* His people. Once again, it is worth emphasising that God's choice comes first. But it is a choice *for* something. The expression 'you shall be my treasured possession' might lead us to think that God had chosen this community for special privileges, perhaps a life of easy comfort. But this is not God's purpose. The grounds for God choosing a special people is His own specialness. And a unique God wants a unique people, one that lives 'counter-culturally', not giving in to contemporary mores but standing up for what is right and good. This is one aspect of their mission: to be a holy nation living according to God's standards.

This way of life is described in some detail in what we often call the 'law', but which was much more like 'teaching' than modern legislation. Deuteronomy 4.6–8 makes the link between living according to God's standards and the community's mission explicit. Moses commands the people carefully to observe all the 'laws'

for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say, "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people." What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the LORD our God is near us whenever we pray to him?

The way in which the people of God live will be a witness to the God who gave the 'laws' for living. By living for God the community will make God known. Obviously, this is a job for every member of the community. With respect to the priestly role we may speak of the 'abolition of the laity': there is no free-riding here, as if some can leave living correctly to others, the 'experts' in the Christian life. Everyone is to be involved in the priestly ministry of mission, because everyone is a member of the community: mission is for the whole Church.

At this point I would like to make an important observation. The idea that a community can witness to God by its life as well as its words is powerful and relevant today. Indeed, in a fragmented world of broken families the very fact of being a community is itself a witness to the love of God. We might start to think about what this could mean for our own communities. However, a word of caution. There may be a temptation to think that what is required is some sort of homogeneity; everyone doing the same thing in the same way. The assumption is that there is only one way to live as a Christian: one either hits the bull's eye or misses. But this is to oversimplify the Christian life. When Jesus commands his disciples to love God and each other he gives a very general command that can be fulfilled in a multitude of ways. Of course, there are some things that fall outside what it means to love; but this does not stop 'loving' being something rather open. If we must think in terms of 'attaining' or 'achieving' goodness then the flat expanse of Table Mountain, South Africa, is a better metaphor than the pointed peaks of cartoon mountains. You *can* still fall off both sorts of summits, but the point is that there are many potential ways of responding well to God before one gets to the situation of falling into sin. I suspect that the great majority of our churches include people from different social and ethnic backgrounds. It would be a good thing to get used to this diversity, after all, heaven will contain people from every tribe and nation (see Revelation 7.9). Yet it undoubtedly brings its own challenges, and this thought may help you as leaders to encourage mutual respect amongst members of your congregations whilst retaining the vision of a community witnessing to one God.

Here I must end. We started with two questions about community: 'Who are you?' We are a priestly people, a community called to represent God to the world (and, although I have not spoken much about this, to bring the concerns of the world to God). 'What do you do?' We proclaim the mighty acts of him who has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light by getting to know God and live for Him. This is not an identity or a role that we can perform without divine help. I conclude, therefore, with some words from the post-communion prayer from last Sunday, the Fourth Sunday of Epiphany. Let us pray:

Generous Lord...
 help us so to live out our days
 that we may be signs of your wonders in the
 world;
 through Jesus Christ our Saviour. Amen.