

There is a question I suspect most of us have asked at some point, although perhaps not in quite these words:

What is the point of being the Church?

Why do we come here on Sunday?

Why do we gather week after week?

Why do we sing hymns and say prayers and listen to Scripture and receive Communion?

Why do we give our money and our time?

Its important. To think about the answers we might give to these questions. We live in an age when the church lacks credibility in the eyes of so many and certainly lacks relevance for many people. If we can't answer the question: What's the point of the church? Why would we expect people to think we've got anything to offer at all.?

There are plenty of answers we might give and some of them are more or less persuasive to the unbelieving ear.

Because we need community.

Because Christian fellowship is good for us.

Because we want to do something useful in the world.

Because our faith has been handed down to us.

Because we want our children and grandchildren to know about Jesus.

All of those things are true. But they are not the real truth. Not the whole story....and without the whole story we will remain irrelevant in the world.

Underneath them there is a deeper answer.

And today's readings give us a glimpse of it.

We are the Church because God has gathered us into a people by grace.

Look at the Israelites in our first reading.

They are standing at the edge of the sea.

Behind them is Pharaoh and his army.

In front of them is water.

They have nowhere to go.

And the remarkable thing about the story is that the Israelites don't save themselves.

God does.

God goes before them.

God makes a way where there appears to be no way.

And Israel walks through the sea on dry ground.

It is one of the great biblical images of salvation.

A people who were trapped are set free.

A people who had no future are given a future.

A people who were slaves become a people who belong to God.

And the remarkable thing is that Israel's identity begins not with something Israel has achieved.

It begins with something **God has done**.

They are God's people because God rescued them.

And that is also where the Church begins.

We don't come here because we have somehow made ourselves worthy of God.

We don't gather because we are the particularly good people of the neighbourhood.

We don't belong to Christ because we have got all the answers.

We come because **God has acted first.**

God has loved us.

God has sought us.

God has forgiven us.

God has called us.

God has made a way for us where we could not make one for ourselves.

And in Jesus Christ, God has gathered us into a new people.

That is why the question, "*What's the point of the Church?*", is so important.

Because if we forget why we exist, we can very easily turn the Church into something quite different.

The Church can become a place where people come because they like the music.

Or because they like the people.

Or because it is familiar.

Or because they have always done it.

Or because they want the Church to look and feel the way they remember it from thirty years ago.

And suddenly the Church becomes primarily about **us**.

But Paul gives the Roman Christians a rather different picture.

There are disagreements among them.

Some eat everything; others eat only vegetables.

Some regard one day as more sacred than another; others regard all days alike.

And Paul says: stop judging one another.

Why?

Because the Church is not a club made up of people who happen to agree about everything.

It is a community of people who have been gathered by Christ.

There will be differences.

There will be different personalities.

Different backgrounds.

Different ages.

Different cultures.

Different musical tastes.

Different understandings of what matters most.

And, yes, there will be disagreements.

But Paul asks the question:

“Who are you to pass judgement on someone else's servant?”

It is a wonderfully humbling question.

Because none of us is the owner of the Church.

Christ is.

And that means that Christian community is not built upon everyone being the same.

It is built upon **grace**.

We are people who have received something we did not earn.

And that brings us to Jesus' extraordinary parable in Matthew.

Peter asks Jesus:

“Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?”

Seven times?

Peter probably thinks he is being remarkably generous.

And Jesus says, essentially:

Not seven.

Seventy-seven.

Or seventy times seven.

In other words:

Stop keeping score.

Then Jesus tells the story of the servant who owes an unimaginable debt.

The master cancels it.

Completely.

The servant walks away free.

And then he encounters someone who owes him a comparatively tiny amount.

And instead of extending the mercy he has received, he demands payment.

That is the tragedy at the heart of the parable.

He has received grace, but he has not allowed grace to change him.

He has been forgiven, but he has not become forgiving.

He has been shown mercy, but he has not learned to be merciful.

And perhaps that is one of the great temptations of the Church.

We can become very good at **receiving grace without becoming people of grace.**

We can come here Sunday after Sunday and hear that God loves us.

We can receive Communion.

We can say the words of confession.

We can hear again that our sins are forgiven.

And then we can walk out those doors and keep score.

Who offended us.

Who didn't help.

Who got the decision wrong.

Who changed the service.

Who didn't come to our meeting.

Who hasn't contributed enough.

Who doesn't understand the Church the way we do.

And the Gospel says:

Remember the sea.

Remember that you are here because God made a way for you.

Remember that you are a forgiven people.

Remember that you are not here because you earned your place.

You are here because grace brought you here.

And therefore grace must become the way you live.

This is why I think the three pillars of our Mission Action Plan are so important.

They are not simply three things for the Church to do.

They describe **the shape of a Christian life and the shape of a Christian community.**

Growing in our faith in Christ.

We come to Church because we need to be continually formed as disciples.

We need Scripture.

We need prayer.

We need worship.

We need the Eucharist.

We need one another.

We need to grow in our understanding of the grace we have received and in our trust in the God who has rescued us.

But Christian faith does not stop with our own relationship with God.

So the second pillar is:

Building up the body of Christ.

This is what Paul is talking about.

We are not isolated Christians.

We belong to one another.

Our gifts matter.

Our patience matters.

Our forgiveness matters.

Our willingness to listen matters.

The way we treat the person sitting beside us matters.

We are called to build one another up rather than tear one another down.

And then there is the third pillar:

Sharing the hope we have in Christ.

Because grace is never meant to stop with us.

The Israelites did not cross the sea simply so that they could sit on the other side and admire what God had done.

They were set free for a purpose.

And the Church is not gathered simply to preserve itself.

We have received hope so that we can share hope.

We have received mercy so that we can become people of mercy.

We have been welcomed so that we can welcome others.

We have heard the good news so that we can become people who are willing to share it.

And this has enormous implications for how we think about the future of St Luke's.

Over the coming months, as we continue thinking and praying about our Mission Action Plan, we will be asking some big questions.

Why do we come to Church?

Because we are growing in faith in Christ.

Why do we give?

Because we are building up the body of Christ and offering what God has first given us.

What are our gifts, and why should we offer them?

Because each of us has a part to play in building Christ's body.

Why does mission matter?

Because we have received hope in Christ, and hope is something to be shared.

Why should we welcome people and invite them into the life of the Church?

Because we ourselves have been welcomed by grace.

And perhaps that is the deepest answer to the question:

“What is the point of being the Church?”

It is not simply to keep the Church going.

It is not simply to maintain our buildings, preserve our traditions or make sure there is a service every Sunday.

The point is to become the people God has called us to be.

A people rescued from slavery.

A people gathered from many different places.

A people who learn to live together.

A people who forgive.

A people who grow in faith.

A people who build one another up.

A people who share the hope we have received.

A people who receive God's grace and then allow that grace to flow through us into the world.

So perhaps, as we begin to think about the future of St Luke's, we might begin not with the question:

“How do we keep the Church going?”

But with a much more important question:

“What kind of people is God calling us to become?”

And the answer is already beginning to take shape:

Growing in our faith in Christ.

Building up the body of Christ.

Sharing the hope we have in Christ.

Because if we can become those people, the rest begins to follow.

We will know why we gather.

We will know why we give.

We will discover why our gifts matter.

We will understand why mission matters.

And we will discover that the Church does not exist simply for itself.

We have been gathered by grace **so that we might become people through whom the grace of God can be seen, experienced and shared.**

That is the point.

That is why we are here.

And that is why we can face the future with hope.