

40 Days of Fitness

A daily devotional by Rev Garry Hardingham

DAY 18 – Is the Church for Real?

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
Matthew 16:18

WARNING! THIS DEVOTION CONTAINS ECCLESIOLOGICAL THEOLOGY. PROCEED WITH CARE!

For people gathered on a Sunday morning, droning slowly through well-worn hymns or staring blankly into space during the sermon, it's hard to get a real picture of what the church actually is. After all it means a number of things to different people.

For some, the church is that building down the street which lies empty except for an hour or so on a Sunday. For others, the church is the people gathered. And yet others, the church is the institution.

But, there is, for some people, another church. And this is the so-called 'real' church, some theological perfect church that exists completely independent of the empirical, sinful, contorted groups of people that mill around drinking cheap coffee and eating egg sandwiches on a Sunday morning. Or meet as a church council taking stock of the number of doilies in the kitchen, or gather at Presbytery meetings or Synods arguing over points of order.

This 'real' church sound great, but is a dangerous concept and has to be rejected. Indeed the council of Nicea in 325 was quick to make sure that we affirm that the church we experience on earth IS the real church. There is no ecclesiological docetism. It was the same argument they used at the time to reject the basic heresy of Docetism which claimed that Jesus only seemed human and that His human form was an illusion. As such the redeeming work of Jesus was claimed to have been played out in some heavenly sphere, not with cold hard nails being belted through real flesh into a cruel wooden cross.

The call and gift of Christ of himself is the basis of the church's life. But this call and gift of Christ of himself, primarily in Christian baptism, is not apart from, but within the earthly forms of the church's life in the world, history and in various cultural expressions. For the church to be the church, it must exist fully on earth and be bound in real history, not some theoretically construct. What we see as the church is the church.

So, why is this important?

It is important because, as human beings, we exist here in the real world. For the church to have meaning for us, the fleshy human bodies that make up the church and the church itself must co-exist. If not, then all that we "do" as church would be meaningless and, frankly, a waste of a good sleep-in on Sunday morning. Let alone all the agencies and pastoral care organisations that the church has created over the millennia.

But, like Jesus, there is more to the church than what we physically experience. The church is both visible AND invisible. But not separate. As Jesus is fully God and fully human, so too the church is both fully visible and fully invisible at the same time. God creates His church and breathes the Holy Spirit into its life. The church has a purpose in God's plan of salvation for all creation.

And if this is so then understanding what the church really is is completely connected to understanding who God is. And if God is real, and Jesus is real, then so must His church be real.

PRAYER

Our Father,

We know that you want us to grow.

You want us to be better, stronger, and wiser each day.

But we also know that growth can be harmful when it is against your will.

We pray for your church, its development, and immeasurable greatness in your name.

We know that everything is possible for you.

Guide us to Your will and give us the honour

of being a part of the spread of Your Kingdom here in the world.

We pray in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.