

“What is Vital for our Church”
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And it is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge and all manner of insight, enabling you to have a sense of what is vital. (Philippians 1:9,10 – Moffat)

I like Moffat’s translation of this text. *Enabling you to have a sense of what is vital ...* This is one of the most important senses anyone of us can have. Our chances of success in any area of life depend upon it. This is what lifts a person above the average and above mediocrity. Without a sense of what is vital, we will waste time and energy on extraneous, unessential matters. To build a successful business in our competitive society you need a sense of what is vital in all the things that contribute to that business – people, location, advertising, marketing, product etc. The Church of Jesus Christ needs this sense.

Today the need is deep for the indispensable vitalities of Christian faith, to see them clearly, present them persuasively and live them devotedly. This is the important task of the Church. Fine points of doctrine, church order, vestments and forms of worship are interesting and important, but they are not vital.

Ponder with me for a few minutes, ask yourself the question: What is vital for St. John’s Church Cornwall this year of our Lord 2018, and what will be vital 6 months from now, a year from now, even a year from now. We tend to think more about the past because that is what we know best. But what about the present direction of the Church? What about the Church of the future? I have many heard many people express their doubts asking if there will be a church in the future.

There will be a church in the future, of that I am certain for it was Christ who said: *I will build my Church.* But what form will it take? However we express it, it must be stated clearly that the permanent factor, the distinctive Christian reality, the soul of the Church, is not an idea or a principal, an axiom, an attitude, but simply and solely in one word, a person. This is Jesus Christ himself. Whatever else the Church has, it must have a passion for Jesus Christ. He is and must ever remain at the centre.

Jesus is vital to the Church and apart from Him we are nothing. It is vital first then for the Church to believe in and then to proclaim Jesus Christ as God incarnate. We must be sure of a real being in Christ. In Jesus, God the Creator and Sustainer of this vast, inscrutable universe became inextricably involved in history. *For love of humanity came down into the fearful pit of history and into the miry clay of the sins and miseries of the world.*

Who is Jesus Christ? An incomparable teacher? Yes! Individuals and nations some 21 centuries after His death, stand judged in the light of His teaching. A good man? Yes! The most biased reader of the NT must concede that. But Jesus never thought or spoke of

Himself as merely an incomparable teacher or a good man. If we stop there, we are confronted with enormous problems and unanswerable questions. Why did the authorities bother to kill a person who we have scaled down to the level of a well-meaning SS teacher? How can we reconcile the staggering claims Jesus made for Himself with His essential goodness – if the claims were false? He either deceived humanity by conscious fraud or He was Himself deluded, or He was divine. There is no getting out of this dilemma.

How do we explain His universal impact and astonishing influence for 21 Centuries? And the adulation He has received and still receives? As a point of interest, in the British Museum, there are more than 3,000 volumes in the English Language alone, entitled, *Lives of Christ*,. Just a good man, just an incomparable teacher? Nonsense!

The Church did not come into existence nor will it stay in existence simply to offer the good advice of a good man. It is the herald of the Good News of Jesus Christ as God incarnate. Matthew's Gospel records how at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked the disciples the great questions: first, *Who do men say that I am?* They replied in effect that popular speculation suggested He was one of the prophets. Then, *Who do you say that I am?* Peter blurted out, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* Then Jesus made a prophetic statement: *On this rock will I build my Church.* On this rock of frail, fallible men and women who believe(d) in His divine human nature, who see Him as the anointed of God, the barer of God's rule to humanity, the Church has always and will ever be built.

Whatever forms, strategies and ministries the Church at large or St. John's congregation may devise in the future, it must communicate this overwhelmingly glorious news that God was and is in Christ reconciling the world to Himself. There is an old hymn with two beautiful lines: *Our God contracted to the span. Incomprehensively made man.*

Next, it is vital for the Church to believe in and proclaim Jesus Christ the crucified Saviour. We must be sure of His atoning death. We must be sure that Christ's death on the Cross was, full, perfect and sufficient sacrifice for the sins of the world. We must glory in the cross of Jesus. The Church's message to a world both lost and loved finds its true centre not in the Sermon on the Mount, but on the Cross on the Hill.

The focal point of the Church is the cross. The cross speaks of a loving God who saves, but never bullies; who knocks on the door of our hearts but never burgles; who goes on loving, loving until frankly you can do nothing else but surrender to Him. The atoning death of Jesus as crucified Saviour is the divine answer to our human sin and guilt and pride. God's forgiveness comes to us through One who by the Father's appointing, took our burden upon Himself and made atonement by His blood.

The Good News of Christianity entrusted to the Church is that of the suffering love of God in Christ crucified. The Church holds up the atoning death to a fallen corrupt and disappointing world and says, *God loves you like that! God suffers for you like that!* And

millions upon millions in every generation, educated, ignorant, rich and poor, obviously wicked and complacently good, have all found their peace and their salvation,

*At the cross, at the cross
Where I first saw the Light,
and the burden of my heart rolled away.*

This is vital for the Church of the future, the message of God in Christ stretching out His hands to bless us with forgiveness and healing One of the Saints put it well: *It is only on a cross that a man dies with outstretched hands.*

Again, it is vital for the Church to believe and proclaim Jesus Christ as exalted Lord. We must be sure of the exaltation of Jesus. He who humbled himself and came to Bethlehem's cradle; who was obedient even unto death; death on Calvary's tree, has been highly exalted and given a name that is about every other name.

*The highest place that heaven affords
Is His by sovereign right;
The King of Kings and Lord of Lords
He reigns in perfect light.*

Jesus is Lord! Whatever else you do, don't pity him. Don't make the mistake of thinking His Church is weak and pathetic compared with the secular powers in all their boast, pomp and show. The future belongs to Jesus Christ, not to some upstart, not to Marxist ideology, nor to Western or Eastern powers. All the personalities and powers that strut across the stage of history have their day and cease to be. They pass like foam on the surface of a swift moving stream. Jesus' reigns now and the day will come in His time and in His way when He will return in glory to complete His kingdom and redeem His Church. He shall see the travail of His soul and be satisfied.

In my years in ministry, both as a lay preacher and as a minister of Word and Sacrament, I have never known a time as today when children and young people wonder aloud whether they will have any future at all; not whether the Church will have a future, but the human race. Horrible predictions are hurled at us about the things of war, disease, pollution, the economy etc. Over this the Church must proclaim with all the authority of heaven that the future is in the hands of the God who was in Christ, incarnate, crucified and exalted. When we sing the hymn, *Jesus shall reign*, we do so with the conviction that Jesus does reign. Hallelujah!

Karl Barth said: *Whoever can say, 'Jesus Christ,' need not say, 'it may be'; but he can say, 'it is.'*

Some of you are familiar with the hymns of Elgar:

*Go forth on thy journey, Christian soul ...
Go in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord,
Son of the living God, who bled for thee.
Go in the name of the Holy Spirit,
Who hath power upon thee.*

That is the eternal commission of the Church, past, present and future.

That is the calling of the Christian in any age and even so now as we move into the new season of Pentecost. It is my prayer that your love may be more and more rich in knowledge, and all manner of insight, enabling you to have a sense of what is vital.

What is vital for you, for the Church and for St. John's? Jesus Christ, to whose name be the glory and honour, now and forever. And as we meditate upon Him and dwell in Him for the future where He is leading, let us always be eager to express: Hallelujah, what a Saviour! Amen.