

Questions

- What does this church mean to you?
- What is God calling you to do?
- Are we as generous to the work of the kingdom as we can be?
(in our time and resources)

Before we look deeper into these questions we will sing

Hymn 28: Jesus calls us here to meet him as, through word and song and prayer,

Let us pray: Opening Prayers & The Lord's Prayer

We as a church we do not function alone. We are part of a wider movement.

We are part of a Circuit of other churches which happens to be Peterborough.

We as part of that circuit are part of a District which is the Northampton District.

Our District is a part of the whole Methodist Movement of Great Britain and called the Connexion.

As a church we connect with the circuit by support in a number of ways with finance and filling of offices. In return we are assisted in our worship by ministers and local preachers who bring their expertise to our worship and our church council.

The district bring their expertise to the circuit and is fed down to the local churches within the circuit and to members of the church.

There are certain functions within the church and circuit that have to be carried out by members of both, such as Treasurer, Property and

Church Stewards. These functions must be fulfilled under the charities status.

There are a number of other functions that have to take place within the church if it is to function well, such as cleaning, kitchen duties, welcoming worshipers and others. These can be taken up by none members and in the case of this church they do. All these have a cost.

What is always a difficult subject to approach is the subject of finance. It is a subject that nevertheless has to be broached.

In Langley's address to the circuit service a number of issues were highlighted. These are issues that need urgent attention within the circuit and as a member church of that circuit we have similar issues.

I will outline these concerns as put by Langley at that service.

As a circuit we are faced with the prospect of embracing change – God has a purpose for us.

I continue to liaise with Matt Forsyth who is the District Enabler who will send out a first draft of the feedback from our initial gathering that took place some weeks ago. Meanwhile, there is much work going on in the background.

Please pray for our ministers, our circuit and church stewards in particular.

One of the themes that is surfacing is that we need to think about growth rather than managing decline.

If you feel you have some gifts that you might be able to offer, please approach us. We sense that there will be a need for teams to focus

on understanding and exploring key options. Also, I think that we have not previously celebrated the scope of our work as a circuit, but if we could find a way to collate and present this, I think we would be rightly proud, and find even more hope. God Bless.

Langley goes on to say this:

The point – just one worrying comment, among many positives, is that we, as a circuit, already know what buildings are going to close. By buildings what I think the person really meant was churches. (the feedback is anonymized to encourage people to be honest, open and transparent). That's the fear that is getting in the way – the fear that someone somewhere will close your church. Well, allow me to assure you. Nothing is decided. More than that, there is not a boardroom where a group of directors make decisions that you are not involved in. There is no them and us. There is no church and circuit. We are all the circuit. The circuit meeting is filled with representatives from your churches; stewards, treasurers, and more.

There are exceptions, and they are not set by us – if your numbers fall or you cannot function, there is no option but to close or merge, but beyond that, you have the power. And think about it – none of us would want to force things – that would be counterproductive – we are One Body and we are rightly reluctant to cut off one bit because we say it is not needed. But we do need to be honest and help us find a way forward that is sustainable. And I am hoping that because you have the security, you are better placed to ask yourselves the challenging questions How might God have a better future for you? For your church?

We do need to act now. To which I respond, we are acting now, yes there is an urgency, we do have a plan – but informing and mobilizing people takes time. We need your help. We need to help people understand and take people with us. Personally, I have a mix of vulnerability, and excitement about the future. I am mindful that we are dependent on people’s generosity. I can see where the future leads if things do not change. But God is a God of change.

Let us revisit what Jesus says when he is confronted by the chaos as he comes down the mountain after the transfiguration.

When Jesus comes down the mountain, he sees chaos, and at the heart of this chaos is the struggle that the disciples are having to bring healing to a young boy. He is clearly frustrated. I close with three lessons. First, he looks on the scene and declares:

“You unbelieving generation, how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you?”

Now, I think that is a word to those of us who have caught the vision that God is doing a new thing but are frustrated in how difficult it is to communicate this to the crowd. The good news is that Jesus felt it. Take comfort in that. Take comfort in how the story ends, with a healing, but remember that you are not Jesus, and criticizing people for lack of faith, when you think you have it, is probably not a good idea! We need to take people with us. Note that Jesus’ focus is on a generation, a group of people, not just one or two. *Mark9:19*

Second, Jesus affirms the importance of belief. Do you believe that Jesus can make a difference to your life, your church, your community? The father of the boy says he believes, but there is an

element of unbelief there – *'I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief'. Mark 9:24.* Is that not true of us all?

Third, Jesus talks about the importance of prayer. Leaving aside a complex look at healing and deliverance, it is prayer that focuses and changes the mood of the scene here. Prayer puts the focus on God rather than our wisdom. As I stand in the middle of lent, I am minded that our focus needs to be on prayer – and repentance, to allow God to work in us, see things God's way, and to be open to change.

There is one final point. If you notice, Jesus tells Peter, James and John not to speak of the transfiguration until his death. He also tells people not to disclose that he is the Messiah. This is known as the Messianic Secret. My first thought was this was a strategy from Jesus to ensure that he is gossiped about – since when you ask some people to keep a secret, they think it so precious that they share it everywhere. But no, Jesus tells people to hold back – people will not understand his role, he is managing the timing of his death, he is wanting time to prepare the disciples and for their faith to grow, he does not want unwanted attention from the authorities.

You however can gossip as much as you like.

This exhortation is to celebrate the good things that God is doing:

Tell people newcomers are finding a home with us.

Tell people how faith has guided and been precious to the faithful who have died.

Tell people how by working together we are helping people who face illness, poverty, sickness and injustice.

Tell people our churches are actively changing lives.

Tell people, despite the challenges, God's support never wavers.

Tell people God will provide, but we will need to give something ourselves.

Tell people every prayer, every service, brings us closer to God's vision.

Tell people every act of faithfulness truly counts.

Tell people that, with God, we risk nothing and stand to gain everything.

Tell people that God has a promising future for us.

Tell people we're seeking God's direction in every step we take.

Tell people that we have nothing to lose, and everything to gain.

Tell people that, Just as Jesus died and rose again, we are being raised.

We have a mix of people, some are early to the conversation, for others it is new, and the challenge is helping people understand.

Jesus reminds us to encourage faith across the whole, to believe and to commit to prayer. (Lord we believe, 'but help our unbelief').

God has brought you to this place and time. No one can turn you away. Come and share with all those who seek a closer relationship with Christ.

Let us pray:

Lord our God, we are blessed to be witnesses to your grace and love. As the disciples Peter, James and John we are humbled to be in your presence.

Gracious God, you shine your love down upon all people. Though we turn away, that love is still available to us if we will only seek it.

We ask that the Holy Spirit shines in each of us, that we might be witness to your love, and servants to all. Through Jesus we pray.
Amen.

We now sing Hymn 87: Praise to the living God! All praised be his name,