

Being and Doing

James.1:22-27/ Matthew 7:21-29

Quite rightly, people are suspicious about people who are always *doing*. I remember on The Archers years ago, a character warns his wife - “You be careful with doing things for the Vicar - once you start, you'll never stop!” And I and many other preachers have been at pains to tell people that being a Christian is a matter of *being* rather than doing, *We are* Christians, rather than *doing things* that make us Christians - it is a relationship with God that we talk about, not an activity. And that is 100% right. But of course being something inevitably means doing things that follow naturally from it. And here in today's readings we are told very firmly that just talking about being Christians is a bit pointless- we have to live that out- with all its implications of doing things.

But we have to be careful to say again that simply doing things for the sake of it, will achieve nothing. In all the parables about the Kingdom (and what we hope to do is to build the Kingdom) the essential thing is that it happens slowly and surely. It would be easy enough to rush into getting this that and the other under way without proper thought and preparation. If we are to build, we need foundations.

Some of you are vaguely aware of what happened to the Vicarage in my Parish in Manchester fifty years ago. For the sake of those who haven't heard the long boring saga — let me simply say that a brand new house split open, because it was built on insufficient foundations, and had to be demolished and rebuilt. Deciding who was to blame, and who would pay for it took over seven years. That's when I was first diagnosed with high blood pressure! But no foundations meant that what looked to be a perfectly stable and habitable house was in fact unstable and positively dangerous in the end of the day. You can't rely on looks. Something as substantial as a house depends for its security on the things you can't see. So the old Latin tag *festina lente* - make haste slowly - is a very wise one. we need to retain a very real sense of urgency. There is an enormous amount to be done in any parish - but it is counter-productive to rush about wildly doing things, and imagine that that in itself is building the Kingdom of God. As a song in a play a few years ago put it excellently

Vicar's dashing Visitors will call on every soul  
So the Parish Council says, and 'tis an 'andsome goal.  
Who are we to tell them that they are up the pole  
Like in the days of Victoria.

If people are going out, they need to be sure where they are going, why they are going, and what they are going for, and how they hope to do what they are going to do. We need to be clear in our purpose and our ability. It was a wise Japanese Christian who commented that it worried him to realise that whilst Jesus went about (according to the Gospel) doing good, he seemed to be content just to go about. We need to build foundations strong enough to support the growing structure and activity of the church - the foundations of worship and fellowship and study and growth in faith. Given those foundations, there is no limit to the size of the structure we can cope with - but without these foundations, the thing is as unstable as that house of mine I was talking about.

Thank again about the words of the epistle - Be doers of the word, not just hearers. Here are two possibilities, perhaps. That we hear, but don't do. That is fairly common, and judging from the fact that both Jesus and Paul have something to say about it, a state of affairs that has pertained since the earliest days of the church. The man who hears but doesn't do is building a house on sand, and is heading for disaster. Being a Christian is something that is not possible in theory alone, we can't be armchair Christians, any more than you can be an armchair gardener. There are people who watch the gardening programmes from the armchair, and admire other people's gardens, but they are not gardeners. There are people who as it were watch other people's Christianity from the armchair, admire it maybe, criticise it maybe, but they are observers - not doers of the word, they can't be theoretical Christians. We have to allow the gospel to be worked out with all its practical implications. But then there is the other possibility, which I have touched on this morning, and which wasn't mentioned in the epistle. Just as we can be hearers and not doers - there is the awful possibility that we might be doers and not hearers. In other words that we fail to think through what we are doing before we do it - that activities become ends in themselves, rather than part of achieving a clearly defined end. Many churches have strangled themselves over the years trying to keep activities going that have been valuable at some stage in time, but have no ceased to perform a useful function - but it would be terrible if St Egbert's didn't have a GFS group (I bet most of you wouldn't know what one of those was) or a crime if the Sunday School closed (in spite of the fact that only three children go in it;- because it would be admitting failure. These things do happen. And the organisations can become totally self-sufficient, and self-orientated, so that the idea of the community having a common bond and common purpose becomes a joke. Let me give you another unbelievable example from my own experience: when I was a curate, we had Sunday School at the Parish Church that was virtually a separate community - only one of the teachers ever came to church, in fact. The dominating figure was an elderly lady who had been there for a very long time. For about eight years, the morning service every Sunday had been Parish Communion.

But during my time there, this woman was asking the children what was the first thing that happened when they went into church. They told her about the beginning of the Communion Service, and she told them they were wrong, and told them what happened at the beginning of Matins, which, as I say, had not been the morning service there during those children's lifetime. Doing has to be the result of hearing. There is a serious problem for any parish if any of its "doers" are not regular worshippers. You can't be an effective Doer, without being one who hears the Word - who is aware personally and at first hand of what the Body of Christ is trying to be and to do at this particular time.

It is, as I said at the beginning, a matter of holding these two things together - that we grow in being Christians - that we are aware of our status as God's children, or being part of the company of the faithful. But then also that we allow our being to be worked out in what we do and the way we live from day to day. The doing is not in the overtly Christian activities but in the whole of life. In their book "God's Lively People" Mark Gibbs and Ralph Morton suggested there are six areas of activity and responsibility. They also suggested with some justification that most churches are better at the first three than the second three, and that some churches don't get far beyond the first. They also suggest that one of the reasons that many young people find the institution of the church so off-putting is that these areas are not seen as the churches concern at all. The six areas are;

A Christian's Church duties

his family and sexual and personal relationships

his neighbourhood responsibilities

his participation in industrial, commercial and economic life

his leisure time

his participation in public life and politics.

To look at a list like that is to be overwhelmed, until we realise that we are all involved in those areas as people - we all have those things (either positively or negatively) We can't escape from any of them because they are part of ordinary living. The question is therefore whether we are relating our belief to them. And that is where we often fall short. We hear the word, which relates to all those things. The epistle and the Gospel say to us - we are not to be simply hearers, but doers as well. We have also been thinking that we need not simply to be doers - that true wholeness of living - what theologians may call true holiness, comes from keeping them all in mind as fields where we can hear and do and be what God has called us to be in Christ