

Hello Everyone!

‘Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Messiah’ (Apostle Peter, Acts 2:36).

‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands’ (Apostle Paul, Acts 17:24).

At the turn of the month from June to July my thoughts often return to Mitcham, Surrey, my first appointment in the London Mission (Tooting) Circuit where I served two churches from 1983, one in Mitcham and one at St Helier, a large council estate that straddled Morden, Carshalton and Sutton, from 1983 to 1990. How the churches changed in those seven years!

The estate at St Helier had been built in the early 1930s, not long after the Northern Line on the Underground had reached its fullest extent. The young people, in their 20s, who had arrived from East End slums at Whitechapel, Stepney, Limehouse, Poplar (etc.), to what must have seemed like heaven, simply stayed in the area. The Methodist work began in 1931 and Sunday School rooms were opened in 1933. With the intervention of the Second World War the planned church was never built. By the time I arrived (50 years later), most of the 47 members were well over 70 and in my first three years I conducted funerals for 11 of them. The church had little vision for the future, only an agenda for survival. Happily, the successful appointment of a lay member of staff in 1987 enabled a new vision of faithful Bible-centred mission and service to the local community and helped turn a situation of near terminal decline into a situation of moderate growth. I believe that today the church is still small but very much alive.

The old Surrey town of Mitcham is just 7.2 miles south-west of London (the point from which these distances are measured is Charing Cross). Although it retains its Surrey postal address, following the London Government Act (1963), in 1965 Mitcham became part of the London Borough of Merton. The population of Mitcham doubled between 1900 and 1910 and doubled again between 1910 and 1930 to more or less the population that it is today. The housing largely replaced the famous lavender fields. Before the Second World War there were two Methodist Churches in the town. After the larger of the two was destroyed by enemy action 1941, the two churches decided to come together in a new church building begun in 1958 at Mitcham Cricket Green – where John Wesley had preached and where Horatio Nelson had watched cricket (hopefully not as umpire!). Sadly, 20 years later, the church was in a period of decline. The old emphases on the choir and the garden party might have been appreciated by the ageing Surrey people but Mitcham was changing. In 1978, the circuit welcomed a new minister, Revd Rob Frost. Personally, Rob was very likable, I certainly liked him, but in many ways he was a visionary – and they are not always popular! Towards the end of my seven years at Mitcham I asked Rob how the church at Mitcham had been transformed from a declining congregation of older Surrey people into a community ready to welcome the ‘World Church’ into its fold. In Rob’s first two years as minister, six significant leaders had stepped down from office, enabling six significant new leaders to take their place. I had seven happy years at Mitcham – evangelism, Bible teaching, a network of small home groups, BB and GB, Saturday night Christian Celebrations (every other month) and international community events as often as we had the stamina to arrange them, showed the sort of church that we aspired to be, making students, young professionals living and working in London, and people of African, Caribbean and Asian heritage welcome and where possible, electing them to the church council and appointing them to office.

Now then, to the reason why I often remember my first appointment at this time of year – because 29 June is, certainly in the liturgical churches (Roman Catholic, Church of England, etc.) the Feast of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, the patron saints of the Anglican and Roman Catholic Churches in

Mitcham – marked by the Roman Catholics by an annual open air service on land adjacent to the Cricket Green. Because of our understanding of the church, Christians in the Free Churches don't have a special class of people we regard as 'saints'. We would prefer to say, 'Apostle Peter' and 'Apostle Paul'.

The writings of Paul, and to a lesser extent Peter, make up a great deal of the New Testament. Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:14-41) is prompted by the question, 'are these men drunk? What is going on?' Peter's sermon at the Beautiful Gate (Acts 3:12-26) is prompted by the question following the healing of a crippled beggar, 'how did they do that?' Peter's sermon at Caesarea Philippi (Acts 10:34-43) addresses an important question in the ancient world, 'does God accept Gentiles?' Paul's sermon at Antioch (Acts 13:16-41) addresses the question, 'what is God's message to us?' Paul's sermon at Athens (Acts 17:22-34), amongst the idols of ancient Greece, is sparked by his teaching the resurrection, when the philosophers of Mars Hill ask, 'what is this babbler (maybe a good translation would be 'parrot') trying to say?' In answer to all the questions, some elements were key – particularly the death and resurrection of Jesus, his Lordship and Messiahship.

A few days ago I sent a letter to members of the circuit meeting that I invited them to share with local church councils. In this I said that I hoped that things will not go back to 'normal' in the sense of re-running 'what we always do' with fewer, older people. Instead, I think we have to readdress the number of buildings that we have in our circuit, the 'sameness' of services on Sunday mornings across the circuit, the questionable value of loyalty to a building and our need to return to the core elements of what it means to be a Christian (Acts 2:42).

The long narrative about churches in Mitcham and Morden was not simply pure nostalgia – though we all enjoy happy memories. It was the story of two churches that changed, more than once, and who knew that although a 'friendly welcome' mattered, it needed to be in the context of a church that knew and understood its own ethos and which, even in its disappointments, knew and believed in what it was, by God's grace, trying to do. These were places where the building matched the mission not places where we tried to invent a mission that matched the building.

God bless



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