

April 6, 2008

Looking around at the church today – our own congregation and the wider church – we can't help but wonder what future the church has. In pondering that future, we're prone to ask for the sake of the church, "What must we do?" What must we do to stem the decline, to increase our numbers, to get more people involved to take up the jobs which need to be done, etc.

These questions are given many answers. One answer, with a small but committed group of adherents, is to declare that we are to do nothing much at all, for indeed it is *God's* work to secure the future of the church. Any future for the church in which it *remains* the "one, holy catholic and apostolic" church and doesn't become something else, must necessarily be something which God creates and sustains. This approach tends to claim the ground of "orthodoxy", declaring confidence in God alone and being largely suspicious of calls to help God along with his work in the world. On one level, the truth here cannot be denied: not works but faith, not an *earned* future but a gracefully *given* one is where the life of God's people is truly to be found. But, at another level, this type of response to our situation is too often blind to the number of decisions and actions we have already taken on God's behalf, effectively declares that we are already where we should be, and waits upon God and the rest of the world to move.

Another "what-we-must-do" answer is more or less to change what is believed or done by faith communities, on the conviction that what has been traditionally observed is neither tenable nor helpful in this day. This is where we'd usually locate the so-called "liberal" or "progressive" Christians. The future is a place "radically" different from the present, and so the church must undergo similarly radical change. Linked to this approach, if unfairly equated with it, is the temptation to establish the worth of the church to the wider society by tending to the needs of that society. Our social justice work continually risks (or even becomes) a way of justifying the existence of the church, first to the church itself and then, we hope, to the wider community. The more we do, the more we seem to matter, we and others imagine.

And then, not a few people have decided that there is nothing which can be done about the church's apparent future by us or by God, and have indicated this in their departure from faith

communities. In this movement they declare that nothing can be done because the ship has taken on too much water, and has been demonstrated no longer to be worth the effort of keeping it afloat.

Yet, though these various answers have been given, and many variations besides, the question continues to assert itself, What must we do? We gather after worship today to ask ourselves a question not unlike that.

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"What must we do?" is a question asked in our scripture reading from Acts this morning, although at first appearance with a different motivation and a different type of response than would seem appropriate in relation to *our* "what-to-do?" question. And yet, despite this apparent difference, looking to what is happening in the reading opens up different possibilities for understanding our own situation and possible responses to it.

In response to Peter's uncompromising preaching of the culpability of "the house of Israel" in the death of Jesus, and God's having raised this Jesus as Lord and Messiah, the crowd responds, "Brothers, what must we do?" Peter's response is direct: repent and be baptised, to which is attached the promise of the gift of the Holy Spirit. For Christians this is all very familiar and, just so, largely without impact on us today: surely we are beyond this. Our desperate question is one asked, *after* repentance and baptism and having received the Holy Spirit. We might want to put our question differently and ask, why do we not see the type of response Luke reports in Acts – 3000 thousand new believers?! What must we do for this to be *our* reality, too.

Now, many scholars are convinced that Luke tends to exaggerate and idealise the character of the early church, but we don't need the numbers to be so large in order to get the point. Had only 3 people responded to Peter's preaching in faith unto baptism, we might still ask why a mere 3 people have not responded in that way to the ministry exercised by this congregation, and almost every other such congregation in the country, in recent and not-so-recent memory. "What must we do?" grasps after the apparent ineffectiveness of our evangelistic mission.

The penitent Israelites in our story are confronted with, and convicted of, their involvement in the wrongful death of Jesus; *their* "what must we do?" relates to a condition of *loss*. Their situation is the loss of their own righteousness – a revelation of a failure before God – and their question is, effectively, "how might we escape this condition?" When we find ourselves also asking, "What must we do?" in mission, we too speak of a loss, and seek escape from that situation. We might imagine, because we are Christians and they were not, that we are in a different situation, for the call to repentance and baptism are behind us. And yet our situation is not much different from theirs. To ask "What must we do?", in the way we usually do, identifies what has happened to the churches as being the *fault* of the churches – a failure before God and the world. We *might* have done things differently but did not. faced with the outcome of previous decisions, what must we do, *now*? There is possibly the need for repentance here.

Whether it *is* the failure of the churches which has brought us to this situation might be a moot point, but finding somewhere to lay the blame is not my concern here. All I'm concerned about is that we understand what we ask when we reflect as a community on "what we must do" in mission. For unless we understand what our question implies, we will be blind to what motivates us and so blind as to its real outcomes. Not to put too fine a point on it, we will then, with the "house of Israel" Peter addresses with his sermon, risk crucifying the things of God, *for God's sake*.

As an illustration of what it means to misunderstand our own questions and to be blind to our own motivations, I recall suggesting to the Church Council early in my time here that Auburn seemed well placed for the development of a weddings "ministry". Such a proposal probably really only needs a clear business plan and the time and expenditure to bring it into effect – advertising, ministry personnel, time, and so on. The problem with the proposal, which really only became clear to me somewhat later, was that the motivation for the suggestion was really the *income* which weddings can bring these days – which in our case could be very large if we pursued it aggressively. This rendered the whole thing – to my mind and as my suggestion – a truly appalling proposal, for the interest was not in the (mostly) young people who might want to be married, but the fees paid for the marriage services rendered. In this scenario, such people would be courted as a means to an end – and an end which wasn't really to their benefit. This approach to "ministry" has traditionally been called simony<sup>1</sup> (selling religious services) and

rightly considered very bad. I don't think it would matter how much we tried to pretty it up; as long as we have a financial interest in the activity, it remains a commercial proposition and not a ministry one. There is nothing wrong with commerce, but grace cannot be sold.

It is very easy to ask the question "what must we do?" with a focus on the benefits *for ourselves* of what we do, rather than the benefits for those who are the subjects of our actions. The interest in mission which has grown so much in recent times in the churches seems to be largely infected by this confusion – the thought that we need to do something to turn the tide. To begin here is to turn mission into manipulation and to treat those to whom we go in mission into means to an end, and not as an end in themselves. It is to reduce God to what we've always known him to be, to identify the ways of God with our ways, and to close ourselves off to the possibility of the truly new, which only comes from open and reconciling encounters with those who are different from us. To have an interest in the outcome of mission is to have God and the world sewn up, and so ultimately to end up standing before Peter with those who crucified Jesus, bewildered that things are not as we imagined.

"What must we do?" is a very tricky question. When asked by Peter's audience, it sought not only an action but also implied a change in the self-perception of those who asked. The response required was repentance and baptism, which was accompanied with the gift of God present for them in the Holy Spirit. This was certainly something *to do* but the *reason* for the action was the release from the burden of guilt, a liberation marked by the gift of God's Spirit.

We must ask the "what-to-do" question in the same spirit, expecting an answer which involves the same sort of shift: repentance and liberation. As we wonder about "what we must do", two things must be kept in mind. The first is that we can't *plan* or *work* the things of God into existence, either for ourselves or for others. Our plans and actions are not the first movement. Rather, if we are concerned at all about what to do, we must begin to pray. This might seem a hopeless cop-out, a step which simply puts off the hard work and thinking. But our prayer is to be very specific, and one to which we might expect ourselves to become the answer, even if we don't yet know quite how that will be. The prayer is that the risen, crucified Jesus indeed becomes a present reality among us. This perhaps sounds quite mystical and spooky, but nothing could be further from the truth. In the exchange between Peter and his audience, the presence of the risen Christ comes with the conviction of sin and failure. To know Christ risen is to learn dark things about

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<sup>1</sup> After "Simon Magus" – see Acts 8.9-24.

ourselves, and so it is to be confronted with the need for deep change in how we view God and the world. But it is also to be presented with *the possibility* of such change – repentance which creates new possibilities of human fellowship and community.

And this brings us to the second thing which must be kept in mind in our thinking about what we must do. We ought to expect that the answer to our prayers will take the form of a concrete and specific turning towards others. The transforming reality in our story this morning is Christ's turning towards those who persecuted and killed him, a turning-towards which does not threaten but invites into a new relationship and reality. The transformation actually takes place when the people come to understand what has taken place and ask the honest and open question, "What, then, must we do?"

We can expect transformation for ourselves – transformation of the evangelical or gospel kind – will take place in the same kind of way. If we feel we must act, then it should be in such a way as to place ourselves, as individuals and as a community, in situations where we'll be confronted with the need for change *in ourselves*, and not simply in those who don't seem to want to play our game any more. Such situations only arise when we are confronted by those who are different from us, and when we discover that despite that difference, they too are loved by God.

If we succeeded in this, then our focus will have shifted from the activist's question about what needs to be done to the deeper question about what we must *be* – forgiven and reconciled. Being forgiven and completed through reconciliation not merely to "God" but to the human beings we bump into from day to day, we might then become forgiveness for those yet to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, and God's work, and ours, would be done. That would indeed be good news for us, and for all the world. By the grace of God, may it be the message his people hears, and in which they rejoice. Amen.