

26 August 2018 – Christ Church Luton

Deep Church: Introduction Joshua 24:1-2a, 14-18; John 6:56-69

Introduction

- Over the coming weeks, we're going to be thinking about what it means for us to be Deep Church. The phrase has been borrowed from CS Lewis who when asked about the type of church he preferred he replied that his preference for neither for high church or low church but rather for deep church. Quite a few books have emerged over the years with a title along those lines and we're going to be using one of them – Deep. Frog & Amy.
- My hope as we explore this theme is that we'll be listening to God and each other about we can be a missionary people who are deeply reliant on the power of the Holy Spirit, deeply engaged with our community, and deeply convinced of our faith in Jesus Christ.
- Whilst we'll be beginning the series proper next Sunday, it is very helpful (might say a coincidence or God-incidence) that today's lectionary readings helpfully give us a frame for an introduction.
- So today, I want to ask the question "where are we rooted?"

Where is our community rooted?

- Where is our community rooted? When I was at school, geography was never a particularly favourite subject but I used to be fascinated by information about people in places, and still am today. So digging out stats about Luton has been really interesting.
 - 598th most deprived parish (out of 12,500)
 - Population of 9,196 living in 4,011 households
 - Our parish covers an area of 2.1 square miles

- 73% are working age (16-64)
- 56.3% identify as Christian
- Interesting stuff. We also know that our community doesn't necessarily have the best reputation – perhaps unfairly. We hear about and no doubt many of us have personal experience of crime, drug and alcohol addiction, poor standards of living accommodation.
- The good stuff doesn't make the headlines in the same way.
- And we are here, right at the centre of this community amongst the good and the bad. Christ Church has been a constant Christian presence here since 1800s.
- So as a Deep Church, how do our roots go out into our community? I believe that God is real and that he acts in his world. And God a lot of time chooses to act through his people – the Church. I hope that over the coming weeks we will hear stories of how God has been at work in all our lives. So if you've got something you'd like to share, let me know!
- If we want to see our community experience the transforming power of God at work, then we need to ask him how we can join in with his mission.
- As a church we do not have a mission. That might sound a bit controversial. But we don't! God is a missional God, a sending God, an incarnational God. The Church of God does not have a mission. It's the God of Mission who has a Church. And he invites us to get our hands dirty.
- Deep Church therefore is not just a lot of ideas or about new initiatives. Deep Church is how we be – to quote the theologian Lesslie Newbigin - “a sign, an agent and a first fruit of God's kingdom”.
- I think I've mentioned before about how in my day job I get to travel around the country visiting cathedrals and working with dioceses and hear about all their different strategies and straplines. One of the ones I love the most is Liverpool's vision to be a bigger church for a bigger difference.

- I would love for Christ Church to be a bigger church. Not so we can grow our own empire or have more money in the bank. But so we can see even more people experience God's love in their lives. Our work won't be completed until at least all 9,196 people who live in this community come to know that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life and accept his invitation to experience life in all its fullness.

- [And should we ever achieve that dream...]

- I hope that you want that too. I hope and pray that as we think about how we can be Deep Church, we will focus on how we can join in with God's mission in this community. That mission will be part of our DNA, the thing that is at the heart of all that we do. We will be disciples who make disciples. Dreaming dreams for the future that we will plant churches that plant churches.
- This doesn't mean that it is going to be easy. It will be exhausting, hard work. In the book "Deep", Frog & Amy quote the theologian Ian Stackhouse who says "the delay of revival success has encouraged a general weariness" which can lead to disillusionment. It's easy for churches to give up when they don't see results. To focus on "internal" differences of opinion about trivial things rather than putting God's mission for our community at the centre of who we are and what we do.
- We need to commit to the long-haul. This isn't about quick wins where we can then rest on our laurels. But nor is it about all of us working flat out all of them time.

- [Murmuration – Jim McN]

- We of course need to be sensitive to each other, a true community who support, champion, and encourage each other in our personal faith and the work that God has called us to and invites us to join in with.

Where are you rooted?

- Which is where we come to our readings from today. Because we might know where our community is rooted, we might know what God is inviting us to join in with.
- But do we know where we are rooted personally? Who is at the centre of our lives?
- In the OT reading, Joshua reminds the Israelites about their heritage and how God has revealed himself to them over generations. They have experienced God's grace in the Exodus and in their desert pilgrimage. It is now time for them to make a deeper commitment, to "revere the Lord, and serve him in sincerity".
- Joshua warns against sitting on the fence: "If you are unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve." Do you worship the true God who has rescued you, blessed you and provided for you time and time again? Or do you want to worship the gods of your ancestors, or the gods of the culture of the day?
- Similarly in the Gospel, some of Jesus' disciples find the teaching hard to accept. Jesus teaches that we must "eat [his] flesh and drink [his] blood" to "abide" in him. His invitation demands a decisive response, summoning disciples in every generation to live lives that reflect the sacrifice Jesus made on the cross. They decide it isn't for them. Jesus asks the twelve specifically whether they will stay or go. Decision time.
- Joshua decided that "as for me and my house we will serve the Lord". Peter – known for blurting things out too quickly – got it right this time! "You have the words of eternal life". He says that Jesus the only true source of meaning and fulfilment.

- As in Joshua passage, it is the recognition of dependence which matters most of all; for this allows God to provide everything else.
- The real spiritual danger comes when we forget we need of God, or when we seek after false signs — signs that promise a way to “eternal life” which bypasses the cross. The message of John 6 is that the true sign from God is Jesus’s broken body, and the blood he shed.
- Joshua and Jesus invite their hearers to choose life. In both instances, this choice demands sacrifice and courage.
- And going full circle – that’s what we need if we are to join in with God’s mission. We can’t do it in our own strength, we can’t do it if Jesus isn’t at the centre of it all and we can’t do it if we’re not in it for the long haul.

Missional people for a missional church

- Bringing these two themes together, we can only be a missional church if we are missional people. We need to have our roots secure in Jesus and be willing to get our hands dirty.
- We can pray that the sick might get healed, that the hungry will be fed, that the lonely will be visited – but sometimes we have to get our hands dirty and be the answer to our own prayers. We have to be the ones who will actually lay on hands and pray for the sick. We have to be the ones who contribute to the foodbank, and we have to be the ones who invite people to church to hear about Jesus. To quote Pope Francis, we have to be “shepherds with the smell of the sheep”.
- In a Deep Church, worship and mission are two sides of the same coin – it is impossible to have one without the other.
- If I don’t know someone, I can’t very easily introduce them to other people. If we don’t know Jesus and he’s not at the centre of our lives then we can’t invite other people to make him the centre of theirs.

- If Jesus is the centre of our lives and we truly believe like Peter that he has the words of eternal life – then how can we not want to share that with others.

Over to you

- Our Gospel passage started with Jesus saying that “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in them”. As we prepare to share in the bread and wine as a reminder of how Jesus gave up his body and blood for us, I want to encourage you to use this sacred space to do business with God this morning.
 - You might know that you need to “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve”. It may be that you have never made a conscious decision to follow Jesus and today is the day when you will say “as for me (and my house) we will serve the Lord.
 - Maybe the words of Jesus asking “You do not want to leave too, do you?” stood out. Perhaps tempted to walk away like some of the other disciples – I’d encourage you to dig down deeper and see where your roots are.
 - Mission – some of you might know you need to commit to accepting the invitation to join in with the mission of God. You know that it will be tough and that you can’t do it in your own strength but that you want to play a more active part in bringing the transforming love of Christ to our community here in Chatham.