

Gathering church

Matthew 12: 1-8 & Matthew 23: 37-38

City URC is a gathered congregation, we come from all over, rather than just the immediate locality. But it has, over the last decade, grown into a gathered church in another sense, one that for me, and I know, too, for many of you here, has echoes in this wish of Jesus in his lament:

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often have I desired to gather your children, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you would not let me!”

For at City URC, just as there are many places we have come from, there are many different reasons why we gather here.

Ask many people what they think religion is about and you will probably get an answer along the lines of “a kind of club with rules which keep some people in and some people out”. Most people acknowledge a spiritual element to life, but do not go to church, because what they think the church wants them to believe doesn’t make sense any more. Or they sometimes go and pretend and perhaps feel a little bit of a fake.

Belief, in our time, has come to mean professing something which cannot be proved but which is tied to a code, or a creed or a set of rules; but it used to have an older meaning, more akin to the notion of giving your heart to something. What specifically, I wonder, about Christianity do you believe? And what, if anything, do you struggle with? Actually, we all believe in some things and there are some things which we do not believe in. Just as there are many places we have come from and there are many different reasons why we have gathered here, there will also be as many different ways among us of understanding Christianity. In this place we recognise and affirm this diversity of belief, in some instances we know that we hold together strongly held convictions that are diametrically opposed to one another. There are some of us who have no recognised traditional Christian belief at all. But still we gather together – and continue to gather together. And we are growing.

So what is it that we do here? And what is it about us that causes us, in the words of Jesus, to gather, as he plainly would have had Jerusalem’s children gather; like a mother hen who gathers her brood under her wing?

Firstly in this place we are in the business of relationship. Secondly we are in the business, through relationships, of transformation. Transformation focussing on the here and now.

Welcome at City is not dependent upon rules or creeds. There is no “in” and no “out”. We gather and journey together, learning from one another. For we all have something to give and something to learn. Here, the sacred that is in me greets the sacred that is in you. And by our sharing, which happens because we gather, we are transformed. We have just sung “As we are gathered Jesus is here”. If Jesus, the Jesus heart, the Jesus spirit is with us as we gather, then love is with us. Love which knows no boundaries, which addresses people in the reality of where they are. And shares whatever God or godliness might be for us. So there will be love shared among us. For God is love. This is the mindset with which Jesus is grappling in our text for this morning. For Jesus, whether you are a good or bad keeper of tradition is not the point. If rules get in the way of love, then love must come first. For grace which is dependent upon creed or obedience is not grace at all.

Look at these beautiful flowers; each one different, unique, is a beauty in its own right. Some are seen regularly, some only once in a while. Gather them together lovingly, as Beth has done for this morning and they complement one other, creating a broader picture and a wider beauty than each individual stem can do on its own. It is in their togetherness that their beauty can truly be seen; and together their beauty is greater than the sum of their individual parts. This is true for us too, gathered in the Jesus wish, as a mother hen gathers her brood under her wing.

And Imogen, this child we have baptised this morning, who does not yet know why she has been gathered with us today, ready to grow up in this ever evolving, bewildering, transforming world of ours. We affirm this morning our intention not to let her simply be resplendent in perfect isolation. Let her be gathered in, as we are gathered in, so she may not be afraid to find her own unique way to shine in and add to the beauty of the whole, gathered under the wings of love, as a mother hen gathers her brood; where we all belong, God’s children, the children of godliness, the children of Love.