

Presentation at Marble Collegiate Church, New York City

Theme: Incarnation in Community

Presenter: Father Simon Foster, Rector of St John's of Lattingtown

Program and presentation agenda

Opening Prayer (written for today by Father Simon)

Loving God, Mother and Father of us all, we give thanks that you trust us to be your hands and feet, your enfleshed presence in your world. Help us to realize that we are called to participate in enfleshing your presence by what we do as a community of believers and on behalf of your Church. Bless us now as we listen and share. Be among us as a God of fun and revealing so that each one of us with risk and confidence may be set free to be actively caught up in your continuing business of enfleshing the Divine for the transformation of church, community and the world. All this we pray in the name of he who had a body, Jesus, the Radical and enfleshed One. Amen

A. Opening comments:

- Churchy words can seem both excluding waffle as well as incomprehensible: what words can you think of like that?

Atonement? Recapitulation? Ecclessiology?

Incarnation – there's a word - over the years we have probably heard that lots many of us. Did you ever wonder what it meant? I had been a Christian for years until I ever thought about it though I had heard it many times. I was ordained in 1992 and am still learning what it means. There seems no way to plummet or exhaust its depths. I hope that gives you hope! For the rest of eternity I will be learning what it means! I believe we learn what it means by reflecting on what we see God up to in the world and today in our communities, and more specifically our church communities. We learn what incarnation means through thinking about its etiology (there's another word!) and saying if everyone is a theologian – and I believe we are all called to be theologians – then we have to make these boring words live by observation and reflection.

So often we are un-present to what is happening in our midst. The thoughtful person of faith needs to often stand back and reflect to grow in understanding to better practice and live out faith and BE incarnation!

Today then I am standing back and then I am going to ask you to do that. To stand back and say where does my faith say I can see attributes of God being expressed in and through my church community. I am going to dive into 4 parish experiences from my own ministry

B. Parish of St Thomas Pennywell, St Oswald Grindon, Sunderland UK

In an area of high unemployment and poverty, violence and drug dealing God's faithfulness was enfolded by the persistence of ministry of lay and ordained. The Church was permanently defaced, set fire too, robbed. Day by day the Eucharist was offered. Most people thought we were crazy to remain there. How could the church survive there? But it did and it is still there. God's covenant love was expressed by faithfulness. We served on lots of community boards- playgroups, community groups. We walked the streets as clergy in funny hats and cassocks. We shouted out by the derelict shops "Come to Mass". Went in to all the schools and did assemblies – state schools! Our most ambitious project for a community that was permanently trashed in the community was to initiate a "PRIDE IN PENNYWELL" liturgy for the whole community with full involvement. We involved children and young people and often those children would call at my house to walk up to Church together. We would do informal liturgies and go bowling!

For me God was enfolded, totally committed and that was made visible by God's faithful people who had little money but so much love and faith, served on committees, helped out and did so much.

C. Parish of Christ Church, Consett

The Church was set right bang in the middle of a community that had had its heart ripped out – the local steel works where everyone worked. The Church clock had red dust on it from the works even years after the works was flattened! What did the church do to say God loves you, cares about you, there is hope? It threw itself into regeneration projects, served on boards. As priest I spent most of my ministry teaching children about Christianity and other faiths. Much to my delight the local state school head teacher asked me to teach his teachers how to teach religious education. I was school chaplain to 10 schools! A high point of an enfolded ministry of presence was a service one Sunday night involving all the schools. I felt it was important that the Church revealed that God was a healer and healed through so many different ways. Right across the altar was a banner which read "healing is helping people to cope" and there were wall to wall displays of what community organizations were doing...not church organizations- community organizations. We had 750 people – mainly children share in that liturgy. Tiny tots coming down the aisle dressed as doctors and nurses. Wow. That church building throbbed with the news that God was in the business of healing and boy did we celebrate it...and in a place with huge unemployment and a depressed economy and psyche.

D. Parish of St Hilda and St Columba Darlington

The Diocese wanted to close the church. It was a shed, dropping to bits. Numbers were so poor. I said to the bishop. "Give me two years to see if I can be a part of making it grow." It was in a very poor area. There was little money in the bank and hardly anyone came to church. Those who were faithful did though! I picked up bits of the church roof on the way in to the daily services. I poked my way into every community group I could find and built up friendships and networks – schools, development projects. Parishioners and I shared in community groups and life. You name it. I served on the Police Complaints Board. I discovered in my door to door work visiting parishioners, the unchurched and community groups that there was life around. I called together a community meeting and the long and the short of it is that we built a new Church, a beautiful church in a miserable and poor area with a new community center. We were the first church in our area to get a huge grant from the National Lottery. Community consultation showed love of God, an outward looking God truly helping us discover how we could be a good community of care creating a shared resource for people of all faiths and non. It stands there today and I am really proud of what God's people achieved. A top quality building that arose from a dilapidated shed; a beautiful building revealed that God cared for the people in that community. They were all made in God's image and deserved something beautiful to lift their spirits! God's presence enfolded through building projects and outreach and consultation with the unchurched as well as churched.

E. St John's of Lattingtown, Long Island, USA

I have had the privilege in serving this parish for seven years. God's people have been amazing in what they have achieved. They showed me God's inclusiveness by calling me as their first out gay rector. How's that for God enfolded? We have achieved so much together. In a traditional community we have been able to establish a bagel food drop to immigrants waiting in the cold for day labor. We have a food voucher Eucharist which is made up ethnically of many different groups and colors in a largely white community. We have participatory bible studies with the poor leading them and praying at them around a lit candle. We have established an 'Atheists, agnostics and for those who are not quite sure' group for those who feel on the edge. We have visited shops and offices in the community and invited workers to come and see the building and share fellowship and friendship. We offer a Hogwarts Advent program that 64 people attended, many children turning the whole facility into Hogwarts for our all age Advent program this year. I was Professor Dumbledore! We have initiated many community services, with Veterans, Interfaith and open up the building to so many groups and visitors including a group from the UN Hospitality Committee representing so many nations. God's inclusive love for all, God's rainbow people is celebrated through our on going work together.

These are some of the ways I see God enfleshed in community. Part of fleshness is pain and heartache and none of these enterprises have been without lashings of these. But the pains, risks, heartaches are part of the enfleshing of God too in our midst as we discover God was with us and through us, sharing in the pains and heartaches and helping us.

Now breathing time. Tell me how you see God enfleshed through the ministry of Marble? How could God be enfleshed more?

Any Questions?

Closing Prayer?

Thank you for the opportunity of sharing God enfleshed in community and let's rely on God's strength to revel and risk to be involved more and more in God's enfleshing enterprise through community

Simon Foster+ Dec 2009