

Rector's Annual Report (2012)
Parish of Christ Church

"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"

Matthew and Luke both tell of the healing by Jesus of a boy convulsed, as it seems, at least according to our modern diagnosis, with an epileptic seizure. Only Mark provides us with this poignant and wonderful *cri de coeur*, a cry from the heart, by the Father of the afflicted boy. *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief"* (Mark 9.24).

This unusual and unique scriptural passage puts its finger on the contemporary dilemma of the institutional church. It all comes down to a question of faith, of commitment to truths which are somehow known and grasped, revered and honoured. But if they are not, then we are the losers.

The cry from the heart reminds us of the constant struggle to hold onto to what we have been given to know in the face of the hardships and complexities of life. For our culture and church, the struggle is to reclaim the essentials of the Christian Faith and to be steadfast about the truth which they embody. In many ways that may mean coming to know what they are for the first time or at least to appreciate anew the wonder of their truth and power. I am struck more and more by the wisdom of Christian doctrine that speaks to the confusions and complexities of our contemporary world. That wisdom is present in the beauty and elegance of our liturgy, shaped and governed by the Word and Spirit of God.

The story of the healing of the epileptic boy is not just about a miracle of healing – itself a great teaching about what God ultimately seeks for our humanity. No. It is also a challenge to our thinking about God and the power of God in human lives. The father of the boy describes the symptoms and the circumstances of his troubled son to Jesus and then says, *"If you can do anything, have pity on us and help us."* Jesus picks up on that element of the conditional, the 'if you can' which implies a limitation to the divinity of Christ. The setting is one in which the disciples were unable to help, to which Jesus responds, with more than a hint of exasperation, by suggesting that the problem is their lack of faith. *"O faithless generation, how long am I to be with you? How long am I to bear with you? Bring him to me."* His response recalls the *Venite* at Morning Prayer: *"Forty years long was I grieved with that generation, and said, /It is a people that do err in their hearts, for they have not known my ways'"* (BCP, p. 7).

The problem is clear. It is about a lack of confidence in the power and the truth of God, about not knowing God and his ways. The same problem is indicated in the conditional request of the father to Jesus and which excites his remark to the father: *"If you can! All things are possible to him who believes."* This remark by Jesus occasions the wonderful cry from the heart of the father: *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*

What is required is a renewed confidence in the idea of God. We have a far too diminished view of God. We need to recover a sense of the truth of God and let that truth reclaim our hearts. Far from being a mindless acquiescence, it involves the complete consecration of our hearts and minds to the things of God in our lives. If God is not life essential – to use George MacDonald’s lovely phrase – then he is not god and we are not alive. It is easy to be complacent or distracted, confused and befuddled or even angry and in despair. The challenge is to *think* God, to recover for our hearts and minds a sense of his sovereign majesty and truth. “*He therefore that would be saved, let him thus think the Trinity,*” as the Athanasian Creed so wonderfully and clearly puts it (BCP, p. 697). Such statements help our unbelief, for our unbelief is not always outright denial but, more often than not, a kind of thoughtlessness, a failure to think God.

As the Athanasian Creed itself illustrates, “*thus think[ing] the Trinity,*” meaning to think about the Trinity in this way, is about distinguishing between two approaches to God. One is the way of affirmation; the other is the way of negation. God is like this, that or the other aspect of our lives but, of course, God is also radically not this, that or the other aspect of our lives; he is always something more and greater. The father of the epileptic encounters the power and the truth of God which by definition is greater than ourselves. To be open to that is to begin to be open to the mysteries of the faith and to find ourselves sustained and nourished by them. The challenge is to recover our faith in the living God, the God who is Trinity.

The first article of our Anglican Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, one of the foundational and defining expressions of the Christian Faith for Anglicans, begins with a wonderful statement about God as Trinity. It is, I think, a wonderful starting point for reclaiming and renewing an understanding of the mystery of God. Article 1 is “*Of Faith in the Holy Trinity*” (BCP, p. 699). It begins with a clear and comprehensive statement about the essential attributes of God. It is really a kind of distillation of what belongs to the theological and intellectual traditions of philosophical religion of more than two millennia and a half about the idea and the reality of God.

There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible.

What is stated here is the shared understanding about God for Jews, Christians and Muslims particularly in and through their shared intellectual traditions of Greek philosophy. To ponder this marvelous first sentence is to enter into an understanding which has been lost in our Church and culture. There is, I think, the greatest need to think again the metaphysical principles which underlie all our activities. By metaphysical, I mean, those ideas that are beyond the physical but upon which everything physical, moral and intellectual depend.

The article concludes with the essential Christian understanding of those principles.

And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.

In many ways, these are concepts and principles that we need to reclaim for our hearts and minds, for our Church and culture. To think these terms is to be part of a rich and wonderful intellectual and spiritual tradition of understanding. It is to think the Trinity but it is also to reclaim terms which inform so much of the discourse of modernity. The term 'person', for instance, is so very much a part of our contemporary vocabulary. Yet it has its origins in thinking about the relations between the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost derived from the Scriptures of the New Testament in the witness of Jesus Christ. The terms 'person' and 'substance' are the categories of theological expression developed precisely to explain the mystery of God in the light of the Incarnation. They are an essential part of the Christian story, we might say.

It has been our aim at Christ Church to reclaim and recover a sense of confidence in our thinking and loving God. For *"though we but stammer with the lips of men, yet chant we the high things of God."* Such is the meaning and the purpose of our worship. I would like to think that has been our constant endeavour at Christ Church in this past year of grace.

The Year Past: 2012 in Review

To look back on the year is to realize how much goes on in our Parish and all because, I would argue, of the primacy of worship. It has, of course, been another year of challenges. In terms of the temporalities of the Parish, meaning the cost of maintaining the buildings and the ministry, we have continued to reduce our expenses as much as possible. An aging population and changing demographics have invariably resulted in declining revenues. We reached a kind of plateau in terms of committed offerings several years ago and face some real challenges on that score. A modest increase in regular Sunday offerings by all committed contributors is essential to the continuation of the Parish. One of the historic struggles of the Parish, it seems to me, has been a kind of complacency that Christ Church would just somehow always be there. And there has always been the struggle about regular Sunday attendance. That struggle is particularly acute in the winter months when we take refuge in the Hall for reasons of good stewardship and necessity. As important as the church building is, and it is important as part of our commitment and worship of God, it is only there for that purpose. Everything begins and ends in worship, our thoughtful attention to the things of God.

I continue to be amazed at the faithfulness of so many of you to our pattern of prayer and worship, especially to the miracle of week-day celebrations and to our various special teaching programmes. The Lenten programme on the Prodigal Son, the Advent programme on the Advent in Isaiah, for instance, are all part of our witness and proclamation of what we have received. We live in these mysteries.

The Christ Church Concert Series got off to a good start in its first season, 2011-2012, and has continued strongly in its second series, 2012-2013. The King's Chorale, the Acadia University String Ensembles and the Capella Regalis concerts were particularly outstanding events which called attention to the wonderful acoustical properties of the building but also pointed to the spiritual purpose of the holy space, something which I think is not lost on musicians and audiences alike. The organ recitals, too, which were part of our concert series, were also outstanding and call attention to the gem of an organ with which we are blessed at Christ Church.

We owe a lot of thanks to our organist, Mr. Owen Stephens, both for his talent and faithfulness, Sunday after Sunday, and for his leadership and hard-work in organizing the Christ Church Concert Series. I want to mention particularly the preludes and postludes which Owen plays each Sunday. They are testament to his liturgical wisdom and understanding. Along with the hymns, they complement the educational programme of the lectionary - the Scripture readings appointed for each Sunday in the Prayer Book, especially the Eucharistic readings. We are extremely fortunate and blessed with Owen's musical ministry.

The choir is to be commended for its faithfulness and commitment. We perhaps don't realize how significant that ministry is and how few places in our Diocese are able to pull off things like sung Morning Prayer and a sung Eucharist. Music is an important part of our liturgical witness; hymns, an essential vehicle of theological teaching. In every way, it is about the Word of God proclaimed and celebrated.

The twice yearly Newfoundland and Country Evenings of Musical Entertainment held in the Hall in the Fall and the Spring continue to be well-supported and enjoyed by performers and people alike. I am especially grateful to John and Emma Devenney for their hard-work in organizing the musicians. These evenings serve the valuable purpose of providing a venue for local musicians and for a pleasant evening of fellowship. A kind of maritime 'kitchen party', they are enhanced by the luncheon which Moira, Jacoba, Helen, Aggie, and others provide on those occasions.

The hard work of our sexton and the faithfulness of our parish layreader, Bev Morash, is much appreciated. He is always there! And I think that in this past year we have kept him off the ladders - at least for the most part! I am not so sure about Jacoba! Bev is a crucial part of our mission in terms of keeping the physical plant going. I am also grateful to the Men's Club who helped out with the decorating of the Church especially at Thanksgiving and Christmas, along with the indefatigable labours of the Sanctuary Guild. My thanks, too, to the Men's Club for helping out with crowd control at the Advent and Christmas Lessons & Carols service with King's-Edgehill and the Church Parade, two other significant events that are part of our Parish's mission and purpose.

Another significant part of our Parish's mission is the Christ Church website set up and maintained by Scott Gilbreath. This year's annual report contains a report from him

about the extent of the use of our site, testimony, in part, to the wonderful images that Scott provides on our active website. Our thanks to him and Judy for their commitment to this valuable ministry, itself an important witness and a form of outreach.

In terms of weekday and Sunday worship, the labours and commitment of the ladies of the Sanctuary Guild are outstanding. It is heartening to see throughout the Parish how people step up to help one another in times of sickness or surgery so that things continue to happen, and all without fuss and bother. My thanks to Aggie Langille, always the mothering presence in the life of our Parish, to Jacoba Morash, to Elizabeth Spurr, to Eleanor Robarts, to Muriel Fraser, and to Bev Morash. My thanks as well to Eric Dufour and Duncan Ferguson for serving and to Emma Dufour for leading the Prayers of the People on various occasions.

The Parish continues to support our ministry to the deaf. The monthly AMD Service of the Deaf happens with the assistance of an interpreter and with the hospitality of the Parish in providing a time of fellowship and refreshment. This, too, has been a long standing part of the Parish's witness. Aggie Langille and Helen Gibson have been the stalwarts in maintaining this ministry and I am so very pleased that it has continued, even though Aggie and Helen have not been able to be physically present. Their prayers and support and witness are invaluable; it is a part of their legacy.

Special events, such as the Pancake Supper, the Lobster Supper and the Ham Supper, continue apace and I am most grateful for the labours of the entire Parish for these events. It is one of the features of the Parish over the last decade or so that things happen through the committed work of the Parish as a whole. That is, I think, testimony to the capacity and willingness on the part of everybody to work together and to do so with a good heart. It means that our labours are times of fellowship, too. Especial thanks to Rod and June Kershaw, Fred and Katherine MacLean, the Baldings, the Oulton clans, Tannis Jurgens, Gaynor Ferguson, Freya Ferguson, Bev Morash, Marilyn Curry, and to many others who have helped out at these events and, dare I say, enjoyed themselves in so doing. That kind of spirit of cooperation is one of the many grace-notes in the year past. We shall miss, of course, Herb Phillips, who has been such a presence and a support, not only Sunday after Sunday, but also at these special events, always with a twinkle and a smile.

The Christ Church Book Club is another aspect of the Parish's teaching ministry. I am grateful for the interest and support of Barbara Hughes, Alex Jurgens, Eleanor Currie, Owen Stephens and Scott and Judy Gilbreath. The Book Club, too, is one of those little grace-notes that belong to the miracle of the Parish. Along with the Parish Schedule of Services and Events which provides the road-map for the Parish, two Christ Church Chronicles were published as well as the Sunday bulletins which indicate the weekly activity of the Parish. There have also been a number of digital mailings to the Friends of Christ Church throughout the course of the year from which there has been positive feed-back.

The Men's Club breakfast provides a welcome time of fellowship and support once a month or so with an outstanding breakfast. The Parish provides as well a venue for the Sparks/Brownies and Girl Guide Programmes in our community. They have used the Hall on Monday and Thursday nights.

Parish Council provides the guidance and governance of the Parish. I am particularly grateful for the counsel and leadership of Alex Jurgens, Rod Kershaw, our ever faithful treasurer, Judy Gilbreath, secretary, Scott Gilbreath, Scotty Cameron, Bev Morash and Eric Nott. A Parish is a small corporation, a body with a spiritual purpose, but one with temporal responsibilities and challenges. I am most grateful for the support of the Council in these difficult times and for the support, too, of our Parish Solicitor, Trevor Hughes. The Christ Church Foundation plays an important role with respect to the continuation of the Parish and its mission.

Part of our Parish programme and ministry involves regular visits to several nursing homes in our community as well as to those who are shut-in at home. I provide a weekly service of Prayers and Praises at Haliburton Place in the Hants Community Hospital. Twice a month I provide services of worship, either Anglican Communion or Prayers and Praises, at the Windsor Elms, now located in Falmouth. Once a month, I provide Holy Communion at Dykeland Lodge and at the Gladys Manning Home. These somewhat hidden aspects of the ministry are also part of the Parish's outreach.

It has always and has always been stated in most, if not all, of our annual Parish reports that the Parish is committed to the work of the wider Church. We are not Congregationalists but Anglicans who are committed to the foundational principles of our Anglican identity. The financial stresses and strains on Parishes are great but we have endeavoured to be responsible stewards with what has been entrusted to us with a view towards our being *"an integral portion of the One Body of Christ composed of Churches which, united under the One Divine Head and in the fellowship of the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church"* as the Solemn Declaration reminds us. I am glad to say that we have been able to make some financial contributions to the Diocese but without putting the existence of the Parish in jeopardy.

I am very thankful and touched by the kindness of so many of you on the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of my ordination to the Priesthood last May. Thank you for the reception and for the wonderful gift of a wrought-iron cross engraved with a reference to 1 Timothy 6. 12 - *"Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses."* The text speaks not so much to my ministry but to the life and mission of Christ Church especially in these times. It recalls us to the things we need to hold onto.

In accord with the Covenant of Ministry, I have continued with my teaching and chaplaincy duties at King's-Edgehill School, another aspect of the Parish's outreach and

ministry and one which allows me to contribute in a variety of ways to the Parish as well. World Religions Classes and Confirmation Classes are part of the regular teaching offerings for Parish and School.

The year past marked certain celebrations: the 350th anniversary of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer and the 50th anniversary of the 1962 Book of Common Prayer here in Canada. I have contributed to a volume of essays: *The Book of Common Prayer: Past, Present and Future*, published in England, celebrating the 350th anniversary of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. In February 2012, I gave a paper at a Colloquium at the University of King's College, part of the ongoing celebrations of the 400th anniversary of the King James Bible (1611-2011). I have also published a few articles in things like *The Anglican Planet* (Canada) and *The Anglican Way* (USA). I have given a few lectures at the Acadia Divinity School. All of these things are simply part of the ministry of the Parish, too, as I see it, and contribute to the life of the Church Universal.

I would be remiss if I didn't signal the hard work and support of Marilyn for so many aspects of the life of the Parish. On a personal note, we are enjoying our place in Falmouth and the few times when we get to see our children. Elizabeth is in graduate studies at Dalhousie University; Joel completed his graduate studies in Singapore and is now in Ottawa; Madeleine is assistant publisher at Quattro Press in Toronto.

Annual Reports provide a kind of summary of the activities of the Parish, albeit in a partial and incomplete way. They serve, I hope, to remind us of what we are about and what we are here for. In that way, they encourage us to persevere and to press on with our life together in the body of Christ. The challenge of our Church and culture is to reclaim our confidence and delight in the things of God. *"Lord, I believe; help my unbelief."*

Faithfully,

(Rev'd) David Curry