

Summary of the Sermon Preached at the
Patronal Festival 2010
What is the church for?

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What is the church for? Even to ask the question is controversial. It implies that the church is a means to an end, not the end in itself. But I mean that. The church is here to serve God's purposes. If it does that, it is worthwhile, and a blessing. If it doesn't serve God purposes, it becomes an obstacle to them. There is a danger of people having blind loyalty to the church, but we should be self-critical about it, and ask whether it really is serving God's purposes. But 'serving God's purposes' is a very general formula and I want to unpack that a bit.

- We are a **custodian of treasures**, a custodian of the scriptures, and of the Christian tradition of prayer, meditation and worship; we are the custodian of Christian wisdom, learning and reflection. Over the last 2000 years this role of the church has sometimes been more important than others, and especially important at times when civilization has been close to collapse.
- Next, the church is a **school of love**, a place where people can learn the tough and difficult business of both giving and receiving love. What the world needs is people who are capable of the kind of love that (in the words of my favourite definition) is the 'accurate estimate and supply of another's need'.
- The church is a **beacon of hope**. Hope is in short supply right now. We have become cynical and pessimistic, but God's purposes require hope and engender hope. Even when the world around us sees no basis for hope, Christians can keep hope alive because we believe and trust in a God whose loving purposes will win out.
- The church is a **champion of the underdog**. That is what Jesus did, and to some extent he became an underdog himself. He consistently championed the underdogs of his own society, lepers, quisling tax collectors, Samaritans, adulterers. Jesus took them seriously as people and treated them with respect, and it is the task of the church to do that.

- We are a **catalyst for reform**. We can't be content for human nature to always stay the same, or for society to stay the same. The church is here to bring about a revolution. If the church is doing its job properly, things will never be the same again. Values will be challenged. Servanthood will be respected more than privilege. The kingdom of God is revolutionary, and the church is here to bring in that revolution.
- The church is an **agent of reconciliation**. Through Jesus, God reconciled the world to himself and 'has entrusted us with the ministry of reconciliation'. As society gets ever more complex and diverse, and the dangers of fragmentation increase, and the need for reconciliation also increases. We Christians believe, in principle, that social divisions are unimportant because we are one in Christ. That conviction gives us a basis from which we can work for reconciliation across all divisions in society.
- The church is **hostel for pilgrims**. The people of God are on a journey, we are getting to know ourselves and one another better, and we are going more deeply into God. It is a voyage of discovery, in which we have to think for ourselves and realize our God-given potential. Like all pilgrims, we need support, refreshment and guidance, and the church is here to provide that.
- Finally, the church provides a **ladder between heaven and earth**, and a taste of heaven here and now. Within the church at his best, we share in some of the light and glory of that spiritual realm that is free from human limitations.

There is a sense in which the task of the church has always been the same, though it has changed in detail from one age to another. In squaring up to the task of being the church now, we can be inspired by Christians of past ages, partly by their strong sense of basic priorities, and partly by how they worked them out in their particular context. The Christians important to us here include that East Anglian saint, Julian of Norwich, the reformers who preached here, and Christians like Phyllis Osborn who have worshipped here in our own time.

They also include our patron saint, St Edward. Edward's impact came more from his death than his life, more from being a Martyr as a King. He reigned only briefly, though conscientiously and well. His death did not arise from his faith, but was nevertheless a powerful catalyst for faith. Edward was both King and Martyr. As King he promoted stability. As a martyr, he was a catalyst for change. The church needs both continuity and the ability to change if it is to discharge its enduring responsibilities in a changing world.