

St Helens Hemsworth.

Anyone living in this part of the world knows what a coal face is! They are now, largely, a thing of the past, but time was when everyone in this area depended on coalfaces. Without those coalfaces the villages all died. Those coal faces gave life to this world.

I like to think of parish churches like St Helen's as being coal faces of the Church of England. Parish churches are not highly regarded in parts of the Church of England today. Society has become so fluid; attendance at church has dropped dramatically. Some people believe the parish system has broken down, that the future depends on mega churches, resource centres, internet worship or some other new invention. I believe this is nonsense. I believe there is nothing that can replace the parish churches of England. I believe this is the coal face of the church – not the bishops, not the synods, not the mission officers or diocesan planning officials. It is the parish system that keeps the church alive and makes it possible for Christ to reach out and save his people. It is through the parish churches that the sacraments are given to the world. Other things there are in the Church that can support this activity: Bishops, monasteries, resources, but without the parish churches these things are nothing. You people of Hemsworth work at the coalface. I think you would be surprised to know how effective you are.

We live in a time when the Church is obsessed with mission. That is no bad thing though it sometimes seems to replace other priorities such as pastoral care, prayer and teaching. What I do believe is that most of the great plans for mission are a waste of time and money. Much more would be achieved by investing properly in parish churches and parish clergy instead of starving them of resources for the sake of some glossy, new initiative.

I'm not a great one for statistics but there are two statistics which have fascinated me and seem to me to work.

The first was put together by an evangelical bishop in this diocese who did wide scale research on why people come to faith. He found that 85% of people come to the Christian faith through contact with a relative or a close friend. There are moments in our lives when a few words, an invitation, an example can change everything. The opportunities for this are the ordinary events of daily life: a death, a new baby, a family crisis, a marriage or just a wondering whether life holds a bit more meaning than we thought. These are the moments each one of us can seize to tell people gently about Christ. This is good news. Mission doesn't depend on very complicated, very expensive programmes. It is actually quite simple. The bad news is that it depends on you; you nice, ordinary people in the pews are the real missionaries of the Church. You are much more effective than us priests. Priests have a different role, a very important role. Priests have to pick up the people you bring into church and move them on. That is really hard work. But you have to find them.

The second statistic shows that you are doing your job. No less an authority than the Church Times recently stated that the area of growth in church attendance today is the late middle aged. As people come to retire, or find their kids off their hands, or begin to realise there is more to life than paying off the mortgage, they look for meaning and they find it in Church. We don't notice it because it happens in ones and twos, but it is happening all the time around the country, people trickling into Church, and it is why those churches are still open, and why I believe **they** are the real coal faces of the Church.

I said this is bad news and it is bad news if we want a quiet, comfortable life. If we want to take our responsibility as a missionary of Christ seriously there are a

couple of questions we need to ask ourselves: How can I let Christ live in me? How can I let God speak through me? If you take nothing else from this sermon than those two questions my visit here will not have been wasted. We need to let Christ live within us so that he can speak to the people we know and love.

There is another kind of mission I know you are very good at: that is supporting young people in Zimbabwe. You know that I help to run a charity called Tariro in Zimbabwe. Tariro means hope and hope is a key Christian virtue. We give kids hope in Zimbabwe. Without us they have no future, therefore no hope. They will have a miserable life and probably die young of AIDS. With our help they get love, care, education and a future. They also become good Anglican Christians. We don't force them to do that but most of them want to because they see how Christ has cared for them. They also want to care for others.

Tariro's work has other spin offs: it helps the nuns who work with us, giving them purpose in their lives and a small addition to their income. It helps local Anglicans to get involved with caring for our children. Also I think that Tariro is a small work of mission to people in this country. I am touched by how often people in England thank me for giving them the chance to help Tariro. They find it exciting to learn about these kids in Zimbabwe. It expands their Christian horizons and opens up their hearts. This is how Anglicans have always done mission – quietly, almost by stealth, caring for people, educating them and letting Christ make himself present to them when He knows the time is right.

That, in the end is what we are all trying to do: to make it possible for Christ to be present to his people – here in Hemsworth, in other parts of Yorkshire, or out in Zimbabwe. The real work of changing people's lives is His. We do not doubt that. But when you gently encourage people to come to Church at a

time of crisis, or when you give some money for us to spend on our delightful children in Zimbabwe, you are opening a little way down which Christ can come to show his people His Father's love. Thank you for doing that!