

## **Lent (5) Growth: Do we have to?**

This may seem to be a strange question, “do we have to grow?” perhaps it is a question that we all feel we know the answer to. Yes, the culture of the Church today is one that accepts the need to grow but, has our fellowship really considered and accepted how that might affect the life of our fellowship.

What if we get the wrong people, what if God sends the wrong people? Often our image of growth is that a group of people very similar to ourselves will join, readymade Anglicans that will fit into our fellowship just as it is. But what if the new people are different, they may challenge “my influence or power”, take my place on the committee. The new people may want to do different things or sing different songs. Do we know which of our traditions help to hold us close to God and which ones we could change without the danger of drifting away from our core biblical values?

If we consider fellowships around the world, we soon see that growth is no simple thing. Many Christians around the world and throughout history have been persecuted, even to the point of being imprisoned or killed. If a new person joins a persecuted fellowship that fellowship must ask, can they be trusted or will they betray us?

In the bible, there are plenty of examples in which God’s people find their faith challenged by new influences. In the Old Testament, when the people of Israel mix with other nations they begin to worship other god’s, they don’t stop worshiping their own God but they worship others too. In the New Testament, Paul writes repeatedly to warn against Judaizers and other novel influences infiltrating fellowships and polluting their faith.

The early Church were often persecuted for not following the fashions of their society. When the Roman emperor order them to worship him, he didn’t say that they couldn’t worship Jesus as well.

It is not just persecuted Christians who are under pressure, while we may not be in danger of being imprisoned or put to death, Christians in this country are under pressure to adopt “modern” cultural ideas and norms. What if these new people bring ideas or practices that dilute or even pollute the faith of our fellowship? Having our fellowship open to new people isn’t without risk, we need God’s help to keep us close to him.

Please pause for a while to think about and if possible, discuss.

Have you paused to consider the cost of growth?

What must we keep, what might we be willing to give up?

Read Ephesians 4:1-16

The idea of growth isn't as easy or simple as we might sometimes suggest. It can even be painful and costly but, we still know that growth is needed and right.

After all, there is always the parish share, we have bills to pay and if there were more of us to contribute then paying our bills would be much easier. It would be nice if there were more people to sing the hymns on Sunday morning, and there is plenty of work to be done. If we don't grow, then eventually there might not be enough people to keep our church open and our fellowship might die.

Whilst these may be amongst the reasons offered for growth, when we put them like this none of these really seem to be the right reasons for growth. So, why do we have to grow? The reading from Ephesians that we have been concentrating on reminds us that Jesus is our head, he's in charge. God's mission is "to reconcile the world to himself through Jesus". Therefore, our mission is to cooperate with God's mission.

The purpose of growth, for our fellowship and all of God's people, is not for the benefit of those who already know Jesus but, for those who do not yet know him. Our fellowship must grow for the benefit of those who have not yet found a place in it. But how are we to grow?

Growth could be described as being in two categories, physical/numerical growth and spiritual growth. Some Churches may wish to focus on spiritual growth but, normally if there is real spiritual growth numerical growth will naturally follow. In the book of Acts, before the day of Pentecost, the disciples gathered in fear and prayer. During this time there was spiritual growth as they drew closer to God and came to understand what Jesus had done at Easter. But as far as we can see there was no numerical growth, until the day of Pentecost when God added thousands to their number.

However, we should not imagine that all numerical growth is naturally "real growth". We could do many things that would make our fellowship more attractive. Football clubs can attract tens of thousands of people every weekend. We must remember that the growth our fellowship must look for centred around relationship with Jesus.

For our fellowship to have real, healthy, and sustained growth there must be both spiritual and numerical growth. Ephesians 4:14 tells us that as we grow spiritually, we will no longer be blown around by new or novel teachings. Spiritual growth enables numerical growth. These two really should go together.

How does our fellowship need to grow to be more ready for numerical growth?

Prayer

What do we need to confess?

What do we need to ask for help with?