“Graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion,”

The Collect for this week:

Lord of all power and might, the author and giver of all good things: graft in our hearts the love of your name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of your great mercy keep us in the same.

Increase in us true religion. What does that look like?

Appearances can be deceptive. A letter published in the Times on 27th May 2014.

Sir, Enoch Powell once attended a country fete and was amused to see an ‘Enoch Powell lookalike’ competition. On the spur of the moment (and having a much greater sense of humour than he was usually credited with) he entered, incognito. He came third.

Things aren’t always what they seem to be. Increase in us true religion – so how do we recognise it? How do we do it?

Let us come at it from a different direction. Someone who used to train people for ministry asked a question; What is the biggest problem facing the church today?

How would you answer that question? What is the biggest problem facing the church today?

What answers might we suggest?

The answer has never changed, it is the same answer today as it was when Jesus had compassion on the crowds. It is the same answer as when Jeremiah spoke of God shepherding his people. The greatest problem religious people face is the overwhelming abundance of God.

God is always, has always, and will always, offer more than we can dare imagine. The greatest problem for the church today is coping with God’s generosity.

Increase in us true religion – is about living with the overwhelming abundance of God.

St Benedict took seriously a community that lived with overwhelming abundance. That didn’t mean that individual members of the community had more than they needed – far from it, what it did mean is that every person received the things they needed.

St Benedict’s rule is powerfully against private ownership within the community. Things, Benedict says, distract us from God’s overwhelming abundance. If we live with the delusion of self-sufficiency we are blinded to the generosity of God. But Benedict knows people need things, and he is equally powerfully in insisting that every person is given what they need.

There is no sense here of everyone being treated the same, we are all different, we have different needs. Pianists need pianos. Writers need computers. Artists need paint. Farmers need tractors. Those who manage need time for meeting with others. People with bad backs need the right kind of beds. Those working with others need time to be alone.

In a Benedictine community nobody counted what they needed, they looked to what others needed, and if it was more than they had themselves then they thanked God their own needs were less of a burden.

There’s the first sign of true religion – living with God’s overwhelming abundance.

True religion might also be described a rhythm of life. Being in the presence of God for others. Being in the presence of others for God. Benedict taught people to pray not because the words themselves mattered, but because the discipline of prayer and the words used, shaped a relationship with God alongside others.

Being with God for others, being with others for God. It is why worship matters. It is the rhythm which balances us. There’s another mark of true religion. A life with a rhythm, between God and others.

True religion takes what we need seriously. Take a look at our Gospel reading this morning, from Mark chapter 6, look at verse 31. Jesus said to his friends, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.” He knew their needs.

The context of that is that they had be sent out two by two to walk the roads, visit towns and villagers, to tell of God’s love and spend time with those who would listen. They came back exhausted, but as Mark tells us the crowds wouldn’t leave them alone. The demands were unrelenting.

You probably know the story of the two foresters who went into the trees with their saws. The first worked tirelessly. He rarely took a break, from dawn to dusk he cut timber. The second was different. Every half hour he stopped for ten minutes, without fail he cut for 30 minutes, then stopped for 10.

At the end of the day the first forester noticed that his friend’s woodpile was much bigger than his. “How can that be”, he asked, “you kept stopping every half hour?”

His friend replied – “Yes, I kept stopping to sharpen my saw.”

True religion accepts we have needs, and accepts these are met in God’s overwhelming abundance. Looking after others means also looking after ourselves.

Increase in us true religion. How do we recognise it in every task of every day? I suggest those two marks are a guide – to live in the abundance of God, and to live with a rhythm of life. That way we can keep in touch with what really matters.

There is a story of three stonemasons. Each was shaping a block of stone. A traveller asked the first – What are you doing? He replied – I am shaping this stone.

He asked the second. I am preparing a foundation.

He asked the third. I am building a cathedral.

We are builders of a new kingdom, we do it one small task at a time.