

2/6/19

May the words of my lips and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Amen

Today on the 7th Sunday of Easter, the Sunday after the Ascension, we reach the end of the Easter season. For most of the year at our Sunday Eucharist we have an Old Testament reading, a New Testament reading and our Gospel. During the Easter season we usually change to two New Testament readings, a mandatory reading from Acts and a reading from one of the other New Testament books, and again our gospel. Having the readings from Acts each year helps us to focus on the very early days of Christianity as it became “The Way”, long before the word Christianity had even been invented. Returning to our roots like this and remembering how our church started provides a good way to reconnect us with our fundamental reason for existence and is very appropriate in the weeks following the renewal of our baptismal vows at Easter.

Today’s reading from Acts recounts the imprisonment of Paul and Silas after they had upset the citizens of Philippi and I am going to consider two important messages from it for us today, firstly the gospel we are called to preach will not always be popular and secondly power is not always where it seems to be.

To consider the second point first; initially in the prison at Philippi it seems clear that the Jailer is in command, Paul and Silas are securely locked and chained in the innermost cell, completely under his control. Then, as so often happens, God intervenes. There is an earthquake and the prison is opened, leaving the prisoners free to escape. This is such a disaster for the Jailer that he is about to commit suicide rather than face the public disgrace and punishment which will be coming his way for losing such important prisoners, even if it is not his fault. He is stopped by Paul calling to him that all the prisoners are still there. Suddenly the seat of power has shifted completely. The jailer thanks Paul profusely and recognising a power which he, as a Roman citizen, cannot comprehend asks what he must do to be saved. He takes Paul and Silas to his house cleans their wounds and feeds them and he and his family are baptised immediately and become followers of “the Way”.

Too often these days when faced with major problems in our world and in our community, we metaphorically shrug our shoulders and say the problem is so great that we cannot make a difference. This story reminds us that whilst we as individuals may not be able to change things, with God’s help and power we can do more than we could ever imagine. In the 19th century if William Wilberforce had shrugged his shoulders and said nothing could be done, slavery would not have been eliminated in this country. In the 20th century if Nelson

Mandela, Trevor Huddleston and Desmond Tutu had shrugged their shoulders and said nothing could be done Apartheid would not have been defeated in South Africa. If Martin Luther King had said nothing could be done rather than “having a dream” social justice would have remained a dream in America.

Whilst I am in no way suggesting we are in the same league as these icons of our faith it is still true that if the problems of the world are too great for us to deal with then it is a sorry world and if they were too great for God to deal with then our faith would be in vain. Whatever we do, and however insignificant it seems, with God’s help it could be the start of something world changing.

My other point is that the gospel we are called to preach will not always be popular. The gospel which Paul and Silas were preaching in Philippi and other places was not well received either by those in authority or the general public because it diverged from the culture of the time. In the Roman world Roman customs and particularly allegiance to Caesar were the guiding rule. Preaching a gospel in which the primary allegiance was to a different king was not well received and would always be rejected by those who wanted a quiet life or to be acceptable to those in power. This changed in the fourth century when Constantine accepted Christianity and made it the religion of the Roman State. For many centuries since then we in Europe have lived in a society in which there is a general

acceptance of Christian beliefs and principles. However, now, in the 21st century, we are back in a society where most people would not accept that they lived according to fundamentally Christian principles, indeed many would have no conception of what these were. Therefore, after many centuries where the work of the Church was to make active Christian beliefs which were passive or dormant, we are rapidly moving back to a time where we are preaching a gospel which is countercultural. In today's self-centred and materialistic society our Christian message is totally alien to the mores of much of current society.

We are therefore in a time where evangelising is becoming an essential and central part of what it means to be a practising Christian here in Chingford today. We are moving from a pastoral ministry to a missionary one. For many of us, including me, this is an uncomfortable place to be. For many of us the heart of our Christianity is being a welcoming Christian community here at St Anne's into which any who come to join us will be welcomed. This is a fundamental and important part of who and what we are as a community and has been for many years. I would do nothing to change that, it is a part of our heritage which must be cherished and is of great value and importance.

However, I am becoming more and more convinced that we must do more. It is no longer sufficient only to provide a warm

and welcoming Christian community to anyone who comes in to join us. If the Church is to survive long term, let alone to flourish, both in general and here at St Anne's, we must find ways to reach out from here and engage with people to show them what our faith in Christ means to us in our life and what it could mean to them. Yes, as I suggested earlier, we must start evangelising, a word that strikes cold fear into many a Christian heart. I do not think we are being called to spend our time in the Hatch Shops wearing sandwich boards bearing slogans such as, "Repent, the end is nigh" or "Prepare to meet thy doom", neither need we spend our time outside those shops asking the general public whether they are saved and pressing revivalist pamphlets into their hands. However, we do need to find ways of carrying that message effectively out into our local community. Evangelism today is not just for religious zealots!

I do not have the magic solution; indeed, I do not believe it exists, but I am certain we need to find a way forward. If any of us had already found the answers we would be doing what was necessary now!

This of course is not an issue specific to us here at St Anne's it affects all Christians. The first two points in our diocesan mission statement are "Inhabiting the world distinctively" and "Evangelising effectively". This to me is the heart of what we are now called to do here at St. Anne's. Indeed, there is a target in this diocese set by our bishop that we should establish 101

new worshipping communities in the diocese in the next 10 years.

The final point of the diocesan mission statement is “Reimagining Ministry”. This involves looking at the structural and organisational changes needed for the 21st Century, and such changes will be needed. One of the major thrusts at the moment is to get all parishes in the diocese to become part of a Mission and Ministry Unit (MMU). An MMU is a group of parishes who agree to work together collaboratively; it is not a replacement for the parish or the formation of Team ministries. Each parish will continue to operate independently. We are at present in discussion with St Edmund’s Chingford and St Andrew’s Walthamstow to look at forming an MMU, and there will be more discussion as the year progresses.

There is, however, a real danger that the formation of MMUs will focus on administrative and management issues, rather than Mission and Ministry which is their title. If this does happen will we really be doing God’s will and indeed will there really be much point in it? Conversely if we see our primary task to be carrying God’s message to our local community and strengthening his church here in Chingford Hatch, and the structural and organisational changes as being there to enable and facilitate this, then surely we will be spreading God’s message effectively and using his power to really make a difference here in Chingford Hatch.

We, and the other churches with whom we are presently in discussion, all have this same view of what MMUs should be and are seeking ways of minimising the administrative and management changes and looking for ways we can collaborate to use the resources we have more effectively. In many ways it is hoped that this will be a slightly more formal version of the E4 group of churches we set up some fifteen years ago.

As our discussions proceed and the plans progress, I think each and every one of us here has a part to play. I would ask all of you to think about what the strengths in our community here at St Anne's are which we might use to assist others and what are our weaknesses where we might be strengthened by assistance from others. Please think and pray about this and let me, one of the churchwardens or one of our PCC members have your thoughts. If we and St Edmund's and St Andrew's approach the formation of the MMU in this way, we will build an MMU where we become a unit which works together so that it is stronger than the sum of its parts. One of the major benefits of this will hopefully be that we will become more effective as an evangelising community here at St Anne's which, with God's help, will make a difference to our local community and doing so without in any way ceasing to be the warm and welcoming community which St Anne's has always been.

Amen