

SERMON FOR BACK TO CHURCH SUNDAY | 30.08.2018

I had hoped that we might have had a guest preacher today but everyone is so committed that it hasn't been possible. Just three days after our return from Japan I am afraid you will have to put up with me – and this will be less polished than I would have liked!

***Back to Church Sunday* has been running for 25 years and fits with the general sense of our coming together after the summer break. And sometimes it is used as a general invitation for people to return to Church after a shorter or longer time away.**

The danger with the title is that there is a sense that 'the Church' has remained the same and it is the congregation who have moved away and done other things. In reality it is more like the particles in an atom: everything has been moving. The Church is not the same as it was a year ago - let alone ten years ago. It can't be: God has been calling us to follow him into all kinds of new directions and we have, as best we could, tried to follow where he leads. The parish priest of a Church in San Francisco built in a simple step dance into every Mass. After the Offertory the whole congregation of 200+ would 'dance' to the area around the altar for the Eucharistic Prayer and the distribution of Communion. It was often chaos but you couldn't mistake the message: we are a pilgrim people. We are on the move and we need to follow God's leading.

This year we are celebrating the end of a massive period of physical change. Two years ago (2016) we celebrated the reordering of the sanctuary and the Blessed Sacrament chapel with a big party outside, part of our 140th anniversary. This year we thank God for his help in a complete repainting of the interior, the chance to hang pictures on the walls and, in a few weeks time, the installation of the data projector and new secondary glazing in the nave windows. I hope you are pleased with the results.

Because all this investment has been designed to show that we have every confidence that St James' will be serving the people of our parish for many years to come. Despite the changes and challenges that a more secular and material society throws at us, the need for Church buildings as never been greater.

One of the great surprises of going to Japan is just how many Buddhist and Shinto shrines there were in every place we went. Some huge, some tiny – overwhelmed by neighbouring tower blocks – they stood as a constant reminder of the presence of God in those places. Buddhists and members of the Shinto faith are not, by and large, regular worshippers, week by week. They are great ‘droppers in’ to these sacred spaces. They come to say a quick prayer and to see, by the shaking of boxes and the taking of sticks out of a jar, whether they will have good fortune or not.

None of that would have been possible if they had not invested in those shrines and temples after so many were destroyed or damaged by the blanket bombing during the second world war. And those places make the faith ever present.

And so it is for us: St James’ is not a museum – not even a beautiful museum: it is living testament to the confidence we have that God is alive and at work in this part of Islington. If the Church looks tatty and half asleep, the building cannot do its work. As Jesus said, the stones of the Temple proclaim God’s message even if Jesus is not on earth any more.

So our first reading take us back to the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem under King Solomon: the whole community is gathered together by the King – all in their glad rags – so that the Ark of the Covenant that accompanied them through all the turbulent years since their escape from Egypt, could be given a permanent place of honour.

But what does Solomon then say as part of his prayer? *But will God dwell on the earth. Even the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less the house which I have built! Of course God can’t be contained in any building – but we need it as a focus for our worship and our prayer: Hear too the prayers of your faithful people who gather in this place. Take note of our petitions and in your mercy, forgive us for all our transgressions.*

You and I need this place: the wider world needs this place and however many concerts or other activities take place here, at the heart of all we are doing is our statement: this is where we meet with God. There is something about this building that moves our hearts to put our trust in him.

The second reading, from Acts, takes us on from there. What happens when we come to Church? We are exposed to a whole range of ideas and issues that might very well not have attracted our attention unless we had been here with each other. The issues for the friends of Peter and John was that they have met huge opposition in their preaching and they want some reassurance that they are doing and saying the right things. So we read: *grant to your servants the ability to speak your Word with boldness while you stretch out your hand to heal with signs and wonders performed in the name of your servant Jesus.*

One of the things that always greets me when we return for holiday are back copies of the weekly 'Church Times'. There are spare copies at the back of Church for you to read and on every page there are examples of the work of the Spirit in all kinds of areas: concern about poverty and Universal Benefit, help for the beleaguered Church in South Sudan, a new David Hockney window in Westminster Abbey, grants for churches on council estates in the north, a new chaplain for migrants in Calais, concern for the oceans, a missing priest abducted in Mexico, Christians arrested in Turkistan, support for farmers considering suicide... the list goes on and on.

And all this is a response to the words of Jesus in the Gospel: *I have set you an example. Just as I have washed your feet, go and wash the feet of others. Love one another as I have loved you.*

We have not spent a small fortune on the work inside St James' as some kind of vanity project. It is a parable: the renewal of our centre of prayer and outreach is a token, a sign and a symbol of the work we also need to do on our internal lives. As I have said in the Weekly News, one make-over is a reflection of the other. It goes alongside Pack-Up, alongside Sunday School, alongside the preparation of adults for First Holy Communion and the welcome of students from neighbouring schools. It goes alongside our joint care of the elderly and all those who are finding life tough.

At the 10am Mass our Gradual Hymn was written by Marty Haugen and has these words: *'Here in this place a new light is streaming, now is the darkness vanished away; see in this space our fears and our dreamings, brought here to you in the light of this day: Gather us in, the lost and forsaken, gather us in, the blind and the lame: call to us now and we shall awaken, we shall arise at the sound of his name...'*

Of course the Church is changing and we are so lucky to have had the resources given by past generations to make that possible. But we can't leave it there: unless the paint and the facilities are tools for mission, for the growth of awareness of the issues of our day, for the challenges of reaching out to people who have no idea who Jesus is or what he has to offer, then all this is just a revamp: a pretty Church but not one faithful to the call of Jesus.

What we are striving to do is to follow the example of the apostles: *Now the whole group of those who believed were of one heart and soul and everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles spoke of Jesus' resurrection - and great grace was upon them all. There was not one needy person among them.*

The work on renewing the Church for the 21st century is all but done: we thank God for all that he has accomplished and for all those who contributed to the work. May God now enable us to take these beginnings and turn this shrine into a dynamic well spring of grace and truth and love – for us, our families - and for all who live and work in our parish.

And will you help us to achieve that?

Affirmation of Commitment

Please turn on the LED candle that you have been given and stand.

Will you continue to listen to the call of Jesus, serving him in prayer and in your care of this Church?

With the help of God, I will.

Will you open your hearts to the Holy Spirit, seeking his guidance in all the decisions that you make?

With the help of God, I will.

Will you support and care for those coming to faith, both young and old, and offer your encouragement to those who have lost their trust in God?

With the help of God, I will.

Finally, will you do all in your power to enable this place to be a haven of peace, a light in a troubled world, a source of comfort, a place where all may flourish whatever their background?

With the help of God, I will.

May God empower us to serve him together, for our good and for the good of all his Church.
Amen.