

SERMON FOR ST JAMES' DAY | 26.07.2020

Acts 11: 27 – 12:2; 2 Corinthians 4: 7-15; St John 21:2-14

Wanting to be remembered is a fairly common wish for most of us. The idea that in a short while, nobody will know who we were or what we did, feels all wrong. The recent pulling down of statues as part of the anti-slavery campaign and the rise of the 'Black Lives matter' movement has made us question the reasons why some people are celebrated and some people are quite overlooked. The only statue I can think of in Islington is to Sir Hugh Myddelton and it stands at the top of Islington Green facing towards the Angel. Myddelton was a Welsh clothworker at the end of the 16th century, who moved to London to learn how to be a goldsmith. He went on to become a brilliant engineer and it was he who put together the scheme to dig a 34mile canal all the way from Ware in Hertfordshire to what we now know as New River Head in Islington, bringing fresh water to generations of Londoners ever since. I think his statue is fairly secure!

On this St James' Day, we celebrate the 145th anniversary of the consecration of St James' Church Islington, built by the Irish architect FD Porter for the Clothworkers Livery Company who owned the land on which it now stands, carving out the new parish from the areas previously served by St Philip's Church, Linton Street and St Peter's, Devonian Road.

I have talked before about the ups and downs in our history but I want to focus, just for a moment, on the very many people who have contributed to the ministry of this place and to the building we are so delighted to be returning to after the lock-down.

Take, for example, Edmund Heysham Wood and his wife Sophia. As we know there wasn't much money in the kitty to build St James' and were it not for Edmund, Master of the Clothworkers in 1870 and for Sophia, there would be no stained glass in the east end windows. Or what about Virginia Bottomley and her husband Peter, who were both regular members here when they were MPs; Virginia was related to John Garnett, Chair of the industrial Society and a member of our PCC who had masterminded the building of the new Church Hall in 1995. Or Vernham Cartright, Organist here during the war, who wrote so movingly about sending his choir members off to fight in Europe, in an article in the one choir magazine that has survived, dated 1943.

Or Grace Clark who fought to stop St James' closing throughout the 1970s and in whose memory the Christus Rex on the east wall was given; or Fr Jack Holden, appointed priest in charge here in 1979 by Bishop Jim Thompson whose inspirational ministry revived our flagging fortunes.

Each of us can visualise any number of people who were very special to us as members of the St James' congregation – and for a whole host of reasons. Some, like Rose Baker, were members for years; some, like Lillian Ladele the controversial Islington Registrar were here for just a very short time. Some moved away because of work or family commitments; others made the decision to leave because they didn't like the direction the Church was going at that time. Each left their mark on this parish and we thank God for every single contribution and for the way we have been able to send people on to other churches and to other parishes - literally - all over the world.

But what is so remarkable is the number of re-brandings that St James' has marked St James' life over the years. In 1934 when Fr Malcolm McLaren was the parish priest, he was assisted by a curate, a formidable lady Church worker, a paid sacristan and a verger. There was a mistress to the wardrobe for all the vestments, a host of flower arrangers and a volunteer whose sole task was to clean all the brass! The Parish Hall in Britannia Row rang with weekday organisations (including a girls' drill class and a table tennis team) and two of the four Sunday Services included a Full Choral Eucharist in the morning and Solemn Evensong in the evening. But by 1969 the congregation was down to 6. In its early days St James' was typically 'Islington Low Church evangelical'; today it is modern catholic.

This Gospel from St John is very familiar. And so is the interpretation we often hear: after a hard and fruitless night, Jesus tells the disciple to try fishing on the other side - to try something new, something that they hadn't thought of before. And over the last 145 years, generation by generation, the congregation here at St James' will have looked at many of the available options and – sometimes more readily, sometimes with a bit more of a struggle – tried to adapt to the demands of those particular times, using the strengths (and weaknesses) of the people who made up the worshipping community at that particular juncture.

But, I wonder, how often have we asked the question: what are we really here for? By all accounts the recently zoomed meeting of General Synod was a bit of a testy affair where, to his apparent surprise, Archbishop Justin Welby came under a sustained barrage of questions about why the Church of England had so readily closed its churches during the Coronavirus pandemic?

Amongst others Meg Warner, a member of General Synod, seriously questioned the given answer that closure was being done 'to protect the NHS'. In her view it was more an admission that we thought that what we had to offer was 'not that important', or at least was less important than what was being provided by hospitals, supermarkets, off-licenses, banks, public transport and DIY stores. It was if there was a general feeling that the Church's contribution might even do more harm than good!

Yet our track record would suggest that when we have got involved, people do sit up and take notice. In the dreadful events of 2017 which involved Grenfell, the shootings on Westminster Bridge, the Manchester bombing and the poisonings in Salisbury, first responders had been only too willing to use the skills and resources of the local parish churches with their facilities and teams of volunteers. The Church had been unstinting in its ministry and it was hugely appreciated.

But not this time. This time we lost our nerve and seemed to show a lack of confidence in the work that we are uniquely placed to do as the Established Church. We seemed to forget that even non-Church going members of our community assume that we will be in the thick of a crisis in ways that are not expected of other denominations which have always had as their focus the care and development of their own members. Whether we like it or not, Church of England parishes have a public, social role which is both a privilege – and a massive responsibility: the care of all.

Losing our confidence in the spiritual care we can give to our nation is possibly the most serious challenge of our day. Are we here for the whole of our community or are we only concerned with our own survival? The signs are we have become very self-obsessed with internal matters like church planting. Perhaps Jesus is inviting us not just to 'fish on the other side', but to return to serving every person we meet with confidence and compassion.