

TRINITY 12 (1st Sermon @ St Mary's, Woodbridge)

In the name of the Father...

It is very good to be here at last and thank you for your patience in waiting. Before Monday night's Installation and Induction, Bishop Mike whispered to me, apologetically, that as well as forgetting his mitre, he had forgotten his crook – and did I have spare one? I assured him of course that I did have a walking stick with a crook, but not on me!!

Special thanks to Rita for filming all the evidence, and to Veronica and Barbara in particular for all their love and encouragement to you, and Liz and me during the vacancy. I also want to thank Fr John and Fr Peter for being good ministers of the Gospel and Sif for her prayerful presence, in what continues to be, testing times. And to Andy whose big day of Ordination it is this coming Saturday, I think the delay is well-timed because you will be my Deacon for a whole year now, and no rotas needed! It is an exciting time for you and for us all to understand more about God's trust, and energy, and direction 'to make all things new.' It is an exciting time to explore how the Church of God can adapt and change locally, as well as nationally, without any sense of fear or anxiety.

If I am honest I have heard some clergy worrying about congregations not returning in the same numbers we hope for and we are all familiar with the Dad's Army character who insisted 'We're all doomed, Mr Mannering!' That caricature can be found in so many Committee meetings and in all walks of life, be they religious, political, charitable, or commercial.

Don't get me wrong, there are plenty of concerns and worries ahead. It is surely not by accident that you see the cardboard poster on Market Hill in front of the Shire Hall here, "Black Lives Still Matter." Perhaps our calling as followers of Christ is being tested and we need to come out of our shells or shyness to stand up against all

criminal, racist treatment by the police, all inhuman treatment of refugees too weak or tired to stand up at all, by themselves. Our faith has so much to teach us about human dignity and human worth and yes, solidarity for the causes of justice.

I know how tempting it is to quote our personal heroes and heroines of the past and even pointing to the graves or statues still proudly declaring their good works, but that is not what I am saying here.

Just take the first 5 verses of our inspiring reading from Romans today and ponder just one verse each day this week. And after that, the next two verses 14-16, will make next weekend something genuinely life-changing. St Paul speaks from the place of suffering and darkness and despair and offers us a compelling alternative: “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.” We are all called to be God’s spies, His ears and eyes. We are called to have hearts of compassion leading our neighbours and colleagues and friends to the God who gives us light, and hope, and most of all, hospitality and friendship.

I guess that despite any of our anxieties about our future safety, good health, education or employment, all of which are real, we need to be equally passionate about the kind of change (metanoia) which only God can offer us. Instead of being ‘doomed’ we are being encouraged, I believe, to be the ‘rainbow people of God’ – proud and happy to recognise God’s gifts showered on us – and then to use them, to make known that sense of love and purposefulness for which we were created. Keep on that pathway, St Paul is saying, “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.”

Now I am the first to admit that we can be guilty of falling in love with these instant media headlines or ‘straplines’, as they are now called. Even St Paul might be seduced in today’s world by the attraction and effect of the best striking phrase or ‘mission statement’:

‘Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good.’

But that said, he would surely be wrestling with us: to get underneath the wordsmith’s craft or craftiness. When next questioned by BBC Radio Suffolk, I suspect he would also want the questioner to be questioned and challenged! Instead of worrying about status (Shall I call you Reverend Sir or Honoured Saint?) Paul would always dare to search out our hearts, test out our conviction, our seriousness, and our Christian commitment. Are we going to change people’s lives by challenging the world’s dominions and powers? Are we going to make a difference even if it means we are counter-cultural? Are we going to remain positive and always stay hopeful enough to understand our need to rejoice, and be thankful, under God’s rainbow?

Mindful of our joint Patronal Festival next Sunday, Mary’s lead, like Paul’s, is to say an almighty big YES to such questions! They have shown us the way, and gone gloriously before us, praying that we may dare to make the same choices and the same journey as theirs in support of the unloved, the disenfranchised, and the voiceless.

In this week’s Diocesan E-News, the mitre-less Bishop Mike offered this mighty and, I think, timely prayer ‘for Teachers & Pupils’. I have adapted it only slightly because it is a prayer for all of us gathered here for worship, and for all our absent friends:

‘God of wisdom, give me joy as I start work in the days ahead; give me love for those I meet, give me hope for those whose future I affect, give me strength for each day and the knowledge of your presence by my side.

AMEN.’

