

## Vicar's Letter – February 2015

For many people, February is their least favourite month. Christmas seems a long time ago, Easter is a long way off and the summer seems beyond the horizon. However, in church life, February is highly significant. On the second of the month we celebrate Candlemas. It is a 'bitter-sweet' feast day because although Simeon and Anna greet the child Jesus with joy, the former's prophetic words suggest darker days ahead. So, on 2<sup>nd</sup> February, we take one last look back to Christmas, before we turn towards the cross.

This year, Lent begins on 18<sup>th</sup> February with Ash Wednesday. A few years ago I attended an Ash Wednesday Eucharist in the Eastern Crypt (Jesus Chapel) of Canterbury Cathedral. It was a memorable experience receiving the bread and the wine in a world-renowned place of pilgrimage, just a few metres away from where the tomb of St Thomas Becket had once stood. The sign of the cross in ash (from the previous year's burnt Palm Sunday crosses) was marked on the forehead of each worshipper as a symbol of repentance and mortality.

Lent is often regarded as a time of self-denial and self-discipline expressed in fasting or, more popularly these days, with the idea of 'giving things up'. Understandably, this notion can appear quite negative. However, by contrast, the weeks leading up to Easter are designed to provide the opportunity for positive spiritual growth; candid self-appraisal is the intention. There is great benefit in being realistic about ourselves and accepting responsibility for our own failings and shortcomings. In Lent, we hold up a mirror to our souls, we embark on an inner journey of discovery, and from this honest self-evaluation, we emerge, hopefully, as more whole and rounded people.

Think of it as a *spring-clean for your soul*. So, instead of giving something up, why not try.....

- Taking on an extra duty or service.
- Donating a little more to charity.
- Thanking those who are paid to work with or for you.
- Forgiving someone who has offended you.
- Apologising to someone whom you have offended.
- Examining your conscience.
- Seeing the glass as half-full rather than half-empty.
- Smiling more and frowning less.

We have a number of events and courses planned at All Saints this Lent. The five Tuesday evening masses (7pm) will include a series of reflective homilies entitled "In the Wilderness". We shall explore the temptations of Jesus and also consider what it means to experience the wilderness in today's world.

I would also like to encourage you to participate in the excellent *Lent Conversations* (entitled "Just Work?") for this year organised by Churches Together in Clifton, Cotham and Redland. Too often we see evidence of injustice and inefficiency in the workplace, and the four presentations, led by experts in their fields, will enable us to explore the place of ethics,

values and the gospel message in our places of work. Further details can be seen in this magazine or by taking one of the leaflets on the table in the atrium of All Saints church.

Many people also like to read a Christian book to help them to focus the mind during Lent. This year, the Ministry Team is recommending the Archbishop of Canterbury's Lent Book for 2015, *In God's Hands* by Desmond Tutu (Bloomsbury). Archbishop Tutu distils the wisdom forged throughout his remarkable life to help the reader to meditate on the infinite love of God and the extraordinary value of each human being. It sounds like a powerful and moving book, and I am looking forward to reading it myself.

The last few months have been very challenging for our church community. Some of our beloved, longstanding church members have passed into the presence of the Lord (thankfully at a good age), and a number (too many) of our friends are battling with illnesses and the concomitant hospital visits and lengthy periods of treatment. Throughout this time, I have been amazed, humbled and grateful to God for the sacrificial love and care shown by All Saints people for their fellow parishioners.....and I know that this will continue. There is no better demonstration of the love of God in action.

With very best wishes for keeping a good Lent!

*Fr Kim Taplin*

## **From the Bishop**

With Lent in view, this month Bishop Lee turns the spotlight on our vocation to discipleship.

A year ago I heard Paula Gooder speak on the subject of discipleship. She began by pointing out that a unique marker of our faith is that all Christians are called to be disciples. From the beginning this stood in clear contrast to Judaism where being a Jew did not oblige a person to become the disciple of a Rabbi; some did but many did not. For those who wish to be known as Christians, from the earliest times to today, there has been no alternative option – commitment to the Christian faith necessitates becoming a disciple of Jesus and the following of his way. The words of the risen Jesus recorded in Matthew chapter 28 make this plain: "Go and make disciples of all the nations".

Having said this Dr Gooder then went on to point out the gap between the foundational understanding of what Christian life entails and its reality in practice. She gave the example of a trainer in a Church of England Diocese (unnamed) who said he was hitting his head against a brick wall in his work among congregations. "We just do not seem to be learners!", he despaired. Considering that we are meant to be a community of learners from Jesus – learning which flows from following his pattern and example – we do not appear to get much past square one.

These observations on discipleship were brought to mind during my recent period of Extended Ministerial Development Leave when I spent a few hours with a Baptist colleague,

Steve Henderson. Steve said that in his view what has been called 'the deficit in discipleship' is as true of Baptist as Anglican churches and it should come as no surprise. As leaders, Steve observed, we do not encourage our congregations to become disciples by setting expectations and supporting them in ways which help them to grow through reflection and action. There are various ways this could be done but Steve offered three questions that church members could be asked which might enable this.

The first was this: "How has your understanding of the gospel changed?" This question not only invites a Christian to articulate what they believe the gospel to be but how their grasp of it may have deepened or widened over the years, or perhaps become sharper or less clear-cut.

The second question related to a more specific time period, for example 12 months, and asked: "Over this given period, how do you sense you have grown as a Christian disciple and what examples would you give to illustrate this?" Answering this could 'put flesh' onto a person's feeling that their spiritual life was becoming more vital, or owning that the fire was dying out.

The final question was this: "What has the Christian culture or environment brought that is either challenging or perturbing to me?" This might benefit from different phraseology but seeks to explore how a person felt the Church (locally or more widely) is providing an impetus or impediment for Christian life and witness.

What I liked about Steve's approach was the way in which these questions would help congregational members and their Ministers to take stock of their individual and collective spiritual engagement and vitality. It also provided potential for more accurately assessing how a church might be 'growing in commitment' – one of the four core dimensions of our Diocesan Growth Programme. It could work in all types of context, too. Steve envisaged giving time and space for congregations to consider this together and to feedback individually, and perhaps anonymously, their perspectives to the Ministers. There could be no more appropriate season than Lent to take up Steve's suggestion and maybe reduce a deficit that is at least as significant as the one we usually so much hear about.

+Lee

## **GOSPEL AS OPERA**

THE train of thought that follows began rather oddly. Years back, for one of those Advent Services that look ahead to the whole year rather than just Christmas, I was searching for a hymn on the Boyhood of Christ. The 1906 English Hymnal gave thin pickings. 'Behold a little Child' was too unctuously Victorian. The other option was a Latin hymn from 17<sup>th</sup> cent. France. 'In stature grows the heavenly Child with death before his eyes.' Hmm. Not very promising. Wait. What of the Hymns A&M translation? 'The heavenly Child in stature grows, and, growing, learns to die.' Not much help there either. I resented that hasty leap from cradle to tomb. True, an external source offered 'Whose strong hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe.' But I wasn't going to inflict that on grown-up people so, defeated, I opted for something more general.

Long afterwards, at just this time of year, two things dawned on me. One was the way the geriatric Simeon, amid his rejoicing, spoke of coming events casting their shadows before, (hence the gloomy hymn). The other was Luke's first use of an expression that was to act as a leitmotif running throughout his Gospel, just like an opera in progress. Yes! Got it!

Approach Luke's Gospel, and the others too perhaps, in terms of Opera, and keep a look out for his unifying turn of phrase. It is "Up To Jerusalem."

You're at the opera, and the first thing you hear is the Overture. But you can be pretty sure that, for the composer, the overture was the last part to be written. Only then does he decide which themes he will introduce in advance to be developed later on. He's been there already: you haven't. Ah, but when you go to that same opera again, you recognize the themes as already familiar, and know what they portend, whether tragic or amusing. Now, the four Gospels are clearly not biographies. They are post-Resurrection narratives designed to awaken faith (John 20: 30-31). Sometimes the evangelists can't resist jumping ahead. 'His disciples did not understand this at the time, but afterwards, when he was raised, exalted, then they remembered.' (John again.) "Oh," says the pupil, "Please sir, you haven't told us that part yet!" No, but sir knows, and expounds in the light of it.

So back to Luke where we began. Here, from prelude to denouement, is that unifying motif. 6 weeks old. 2: 22, Up to Jerusalem. 12 years old 2:41-2, Up to Jerusalem. 30 years old (This is really discordant) Up, courtesy of the devil, to Jerusalem's highest imaginable point. And so it goes on. The interested can pursue the narrative through 9:31 & 51; 17:11 to 19:28. But the uttered climax comes at 18:31. "Behold, we go up to Jerusalem, and Everything will be accomplished." Destination, Destiny.

Epilogue. It's more than likely that Luke has already at least drafted his Volume II ('Acts') where he will reveal that the milieu is going to shift from Jerusalem to Athens, then Rome, and thence to "the ends of the earth." This is where we make our appearance, because, while Luke is still writing, our offshore island becomes part of that same Roman Empire that is the wide stage-set for Luke's entire composition.

*Ken Smith*

## **IN THIS MONTH...FEBRUARY 1930**

Excerpts from the vicar's (Canon Gillson's) notes

In response to a number of requests the Social Committee is arranging for a Parish Social in the All Saints' Hall to take place on February 19th, 7.30 to 11 p.m. Refreshment tickets price 1/- may be bought at the Choir School or from Mr Probyn, Alma Vale Road. We learn from experience how to run these evenings; the most popular programme seems to be to keep the first hour as informal as possible and to encourage conversation by items of music. The fact that our conversational powers have to be repressed for a few moments ensures that we shall break forth into an even more scintillating manner when the musician has done with us. At 8.30 we have refreshments, which should lead to a general post so far as seats are concerned and draw us into fresh groups. Then at 9 o'clock we all become very formal and solemn while those slow movements are executed on the floor of the house to which the present generation apply the term dancing: at least that is how it appears to an ancient Victorian who used to enjoy a polka, or a gallop to John Peel - no doubt he is sadly out of date. This year we shall provide some whist tables in the small hall for those who prefer that form of entertainment.

That the church should have been made warm, and kept so for several weeks, in mid-winter is so astonishing an accomplishment that it deserves to be put on record. It reached what I

hoped was a climax on a singularly warm Sunday when the temperature was high enough to satisfy any lizard with normal circulation. Whether the change is desirable or not is of course entirely a matter of opinion, but I hope that those who have complained so long and bitterly of the arctic cold in church may feel that for once their needs have been attended to and fully satisfied, and will not forget the coal bill.

## **Deliver us from Evil**

*Evil is live backwards.*

Evil operates in our world by disrupting, devaluing and destroying all that is positive about life and living. The hideous face of Evil is unmasked in the narrative of the three temptations of Jesus in the wilderness.

In the first temptation, the devil seeks to provoke uncertainty in Jesus' mind about his identity by saying, "*If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.*" (St Luke 4.3 – R.S.V.) After 40 days of fasting, Jesus' Achilles' heel is deliberately targeted. Evil can be deviously rational, it seeks to destructively criticise and to discourage.

In the second temptation, the devil promises Jesus the glory of political power. If the first temptation was psychologically subtle, the second represents 'route one' evil. The devil's offer represents a flagrant deception and it implies that the only authority worth exercising is coercive. Evil lies and celebrates dominance.

In the third temptation, Jesus is transported to the highest point of the Jerusalem Temple and he is challenged by the devil to jump. This is not a publicity stunt to court popularity, but an attack on Jesus' confidence in his relationship with his Father. The devil even quotes Scripture as part of his ploy to question God's care.

*Evil sows doubt, it targets our weaknesses, it is cynically reasonable, it blatantly lies, it seeks to control, it persistently undermines and it questions God's love.*

"Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Amen."

*Fr Kim Taplin*

## **FORTHCOMING EVENTS (not at All Saints)**

The Glastonbury Pilgrimage. This will take place on **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July.**

Solemn Mass will be celebrated in the Abbey ruins at 12 noon; the preacher will be The Rt Revd Norman Banks SSC, Bishop of Richborough. The Procession of Witness through the streets of the town will start at 3.00pm, leading to Solemn Benediction in the Abbey.

Assumptiontide Festival. The Bristol Catholic Societies Assumptiontide Festival will be on **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> August.** Solemn Concelebrated Mass, preceded by Procession of Our Lady, at which the Principal Celebrant & Preacher will be the Rt Revd Martyn Jarrett SSC, formerly Bishop of Beverly, will be in Bristol Cathedral at 12 noon. Solemn Vespers and Benediction will take place in the Lord Mayor's Chapel, College Green, at 3.00pm. *At All Saints Clifton the Assumption of Our Lady will be celebrated on Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August.*

All are welcome at these two functions. Full details will be published later; in the meantime, further information may be had from Chris Verity. ([christopher.verity@virginmedia.com](mailto:christopher.verity@virginmedia.com)).

*Chris Verity*