

THE CLARION

The Magazine of The Parish of St Mary The Boltons

May 2009

Stewardship Campaign 2009-12

Our stewardship campaign is well under way and many thanks to all who have already responded so positively. If you have not already done so, there is still time: the campaign ends on Sunday 17 May.

Last Sunday, (26 April) Kristin-Anne Rutter, a member of the stewardship campaign committee, spoke about how fortunate we are at St. Mary's: we are a welcoming and lively worshipping community, with a beautiful church and garden, and church members are active both within the church and the community.

We are indeed fortunate, but there are considerable costs involved in running St. Mary's, and these need to be covered on an annual basis, leaving enough over in case of emergencies, especially in the fabric of the church building and its contents, and the vicarage. Kristin-Anne freely admitted that before she came onto the stewardship committee, she had no idea how much it costs to maintain St. Mary's. (Last year our running expenses amounted to about £210,300). In order to continue being the church that we are, I very much hope that this campaign will be successful in achieving its financial target, which is to raise an extra £40,000 per annum. This is ambitious and to make things more difficult for us we are hoping to raise this money in very difficult economic times, which show no signs of getting better in the short or even medium term. All of us are likely to have less money in our pockets and bank accounts. Yet as Jesus reminds us in Matthew's Gospel 'where your treasure is, there will be your heart also'; we put our treasure (money) in the things that are most important to us.

I very much hope that St. Mary's is an important place for you: a place where you can come and worship God regularly, where your faith is nurtured, where you are welcomed and valued, where we support and

encourage one another and where we seek to serve God.

With the campaign letter that was sent out to everyone on our mailing list, some received a piece of jigsaw puzzle which we asked you to return with your commitment form. If you have not already done so, we would be very pleased if you could return the piece so that we can complete the puzzle by 17 May and so celebrate the successful campaign.

Please come and support two events being held in connection with our Stewardship Campaign: **Thursday 7 May at 7.0pm in the church, Evan Davis, the BBC's economic correspondent and presenter of the Today Programme, will speak on the economic crisis, and on Saturday 9 May from 2.30pm to 5pm there will be a Family Party and Children's Entertainment in the church hall and garden.**

Stewardship Committee

From Ginny's report to the APCM, 30 April

I would like to begin by thanking everyone who in any way has made a contribution to St. Mary's over the past year. This is always a dangerous task because it's so easy to overlook an individual or group of individuals who have contributed to our common life. Most people who come to church on a Sunday morning have no idea how much work has gone on behind the scenes to prepare for that hour and a quarter of worship. There are those who work in the vestry, setting out clergy vestments, preparing the wine and wafers for communion, those who set up the sanctuary for the service; those whose come in response to being on rotas that are compiled every three months: the acolytes, sides people, readers and intercessors. Then there are those who come to serve the coffee and prepare and serve the monthly Sunday

lunches, and those who have come prepared to lead and help with Sunday School. On choir Sundays the choir comes in to rehearse before the service. As everyone comes into the church on Sundays, they pass through the gardens that have been so well looked after by a group of dedicated gardeners on a Saturday morning.

In addition to all these people, there have been people in church during the week to arrange the flowers, clean the brass and silver and to iron the altar linen. The pew sheet, giving details of the service, has been folded and if there is to be a baptism in the afternoon, the necessary order of service has been folded and put out ready for use.

All these people have given of their time and talents for the Sunday service as we gather together to worship God with thanksgiving and praise. Yet there are also other times in the week when the church is being used: Wednesday evenings when there is a midweek Eucharist; one Thursday a month when there is a Eucharist and lunch. In addition, The Clarion is edited before it comes out each month and the electoral roll list is kept up to date. Each year also sees some special events, for example the Summer Fair, which are organised by members of the parish and congregation. All these things are done by **volunteers**; without them, without you, St. Mary's could not function. Many, many thanks to all of you who have worked so hard and selflessly in these various roles that are vital to our life at St. Mary's.

Sometimes I think St. Mary's seeks to be a contradiction in terms. With our beautiful church and gardens, we seek to be an oasis of calm and quiet (when building works in The Boltons allow) where people can come to sit quietly in the garden or in the church to spend time in thought and prayer without being disturbed. But we also seek to be a church that actively reaches out to those around us, whether it is helping with reading at St. Cuthbert and St. Matthias' School, or helping with meals in the Christmas period at the Earl's Court Community Project and the West London Churches Homeless Concern. Through our fundraising efforts each year –

most notably the Summer Fair – we seek to support financially people who are in need, both locally and further afield.

Later in this year we will be holding a community audit, to find out how we are perceived by the people around us and in the parish and to find out more about our local community. This initiative is being undertaken by Ruth Lampard, our Associate Vicar, and will help us to see how others see us and also where it might be appropriate for us to respond to the needs around us. Thanks to Ruth, we are already making contact with people and events in the parish, and this year St. Mary's will host a concert and 'The Big Lunch' during the Earl's Court Festival in July. Please watch The Clarion for further details.

Ruth joined St. Mary's as Associate Vicar in November last year and she is a great asset to the staff. I very much value and enjoy having a clergy colleague to share the liturgical and pastoral duties and also to discuss ideas with and make plans. Ruth has been able to support and strengthen our Sunday School and work with our young parishioners, recruiting more servers/acolytes for the Sunday service, and organising a monthly discussion group for teenagers and another for Young Adults. I am confident that in the coming year Ruth will continue to add a great deal to St. Mary's life, both in the church and the parish.

We are very fortunate at St. Mary's to have a small staff team that works well together. John McVeigh, the parish administrator, and David Ireton, the verger, work well beyond the hours they are paid and I am very grateful for all they do and the support they give Ruth and me. Someone who is rarely seen because he comes in early every morning, is Trent Jardine, who cleans the halls and occasionally stands in for David when the halls are in use over the weekend. He is unfailingly cheerful and reliable and works hard. As with the work of all our volunteers, much of John's, David's and Trent's work goes on behind the scenes.

Of all the things that we do at St. Mary's, our worship is the most important. It is why we are here and I would like to thank all who come to worship with us and all who take a more visible role in the services. I would

especially like to thank Graham Caldbeck, our Director of Music, who sets a high standard of music not just for the festivals but also for our weekly worship. I am very grateful for all the trouble he takes in choosing and planning the music that so enhances our worship, and for encouraging the choir to ever greater heights. My thanks are also due to the wardens, Mark Nichols and Arthur Tait and to members of the PCC who worked especially hard last year. Their commitment to St. Mary's and the many ways in which they support my work are greatly appreciated; they not only make my role easier, but also much more enjoyable.

I would also like to thank all who are responsible for keeping our finances in good order. Carolyn Stubbs our treasurer, Bill Gallagher our assistant treasurer and John Barker our stewardship recorder. All their work goes on behind the scenes, yet it is often detailed and time consuming but it is vital. Without their dedication our financial records would be in a perilous state.

Of all the work that goes on behind the scenes at St. Mary's, the most hidden is that of the Prayer Group who pray regularly for the sick and those in special need, holding them and their families before God, praying for healing and wholeness. I would like to thank them for their dedication and commitment to this quiet, vital and ongoing ministry.

As we look back over the past year we have much to be thankful for and to celebrate. I hope that this current year will prove to be similar when we come to look back on it. With your continued presence, help, enthusiasm and dedication it will be, and I look forward to another fruitful year at St. Mary's.
Ginny Thomas

The Lord's Prayer

The Our Father is such a well-known prayer that we can easily forget what a treasury it also can be. While it is a specifically Christian prayer, it has roots in Judaism where similar prayers were known long before Jesus. Below are three different ways of using and

understanding the Our Father that may be unfamiliar.

Saint Francis of Assisi wrote (or more likely dictated) various 'praises'. The Lord's Prayer is one of the texts that he paraphrased (1).

Our Father: Creator, Redeemer, Saviour and Comforter.

In Heaven: In the angels and the saints. You give them light so that they may have knowledge, because You are light. You inflame them so that they may love, because You are love. You live continually in them so that they may be happy, because You are the supreme good, the eternal good, and it is from You all good comes and without You there is no good.

Hallowed be your name: May our knowledge of You become ever clearer, so that we may realise the breadth of Your blessings, the extent of Your promises, the height of Your majesty and the depth of Your judgements.

Your kingdom come: So that You may reign in us by Your grace and bring us to Your kingdom, where we shall see You clearly, love You perfectly, be happy in Your company and enjoy You for ever.

Your will be done, on Earth as in Heaven: That we may love You with our whole heart by always thinking of You; with our whole mind by directing our whole intention towards You and seeking Your glory in everything; and with all our strength by spending all our energies and affections of soul and body in the service of Your love alone. And may we love our neighbour as ourselves, encouraging them all to love You as best we can, rejoicing at the good fortune of others, just as if it were our own, and sympathising with their misfortunes, while giving offence to no one.

Give us today our daily bread: Your own beloved Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, to remind us of the love He showed for us and to help us to understand and appreciate it and everything that He did or said or suffered.

And forgive us our sins: In Your infinite mercy, and by the power of the passion of Your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the merits and the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and all the saints.

As we forgive those who sin against us: And if we do not forgive perfectly, make us forgive

perfectly, so that we may truly love our enemies for love of You and pray fervently to You for them, returning no one evil for evil, anxious only to serve everybody in you.
Lead us not into temptation: Hidden or obvious, sudden or unforeseen.
But deliver us from evil: Present, past or future.
Amen.

The following is a meditation from South America (adapted) and used at St. Mary's some years ago (printed in a Sunday pew leaflet).

Our Father, Lord of heaven and earth
holy is your name
in people who are hungry yet share
their bread and their song.
Your kingdom come;
a generous land where confidence
and truth reign.
Let us do your will,
a cool breeze
for those who sweat.
You give us our daily bread.
May we pay a fair price for our food.
Forgive us
for keeping silent in the face of injustice or for
burying people's dreams.
Do not let us fall into the temptation
of taking up the same arms as the enemy.
But deliver us from those evils
that
diminish and divide us.
For the glory of God is people
who are fully alive
and the world flourishing as
the Creator intended.
For God is the power
and the glory is his.
Amen.

The third version is a translation of the prayer from Aramaic. The prayer we use in Church was of course written in Greek, but Jesus and his contemporaries used Aramaic as their everyday language. Aramaic is still spoken today in parts of Syria and among some small churches in the area. Neil Douglas-Klotz, a teacher of movement, music and voice in Oakland, CA, has made it his life's work to 're-translate' key texts, especially the Our Father

and the Beatitudes, into English from their Aramaic sources. Douglas-Klotz (2) explains that 'both native Middle Eastern and Hebraic mysticism [say] that each statement of sacred teaching must be examined from at least three points of view: the intellectual, the metaphorical, and the universal (or mystical)'. From the first viewpoint, the face value of the words is considered, i.e. the literal meaning. The second viewpoint considers 'how a statement or story presents a metaphor for our lives'; and from the universal or mystical viewpoint 'one comes to a truth of the experience pointed to by a particular statement'. Here it is the 'wordless experience' that is expressed.

In the light of these ways of understanding the language and the context of the prayer, Douglas-Klotz has published various similar versions in English of the Our Father, taking into account the literal, metaphorical and mystical meaning of the statements. One such version was taken from his website (3), though this is no longer available for free now.

O cosmic Birther of all radiance and vibration
soften the ground of our being and carve out a
space
within us where Your Presence can abide.
Fill us with Your creativity so that we may be
empowered
to bear the fruit of Your mission.
Let each of our action bear fruit in accordance
with your desire.
Endow us with the wisdom to produce
and share what each being needs to grow and
flourish.
Untie the tangled threads of destiny that bind
us,
as we release others from the entanglement of
past mistakes.
Do not let us be seduced by that which would
divert us from our
true purpose, but illuminate the opportunities
of the present moment.
For You are the round and fruitful vision, the
birth-power and
fulfilment, as all is gathered and made whole
once again.
Verena Tschudin

References

1. St Francis' Paraphrase of the Lord's Prayer. Available from: URL <http://www.tssf.org.uk/Members/Devotions/The%20Lords%20Prayer.html>, Accessed 26 March 2009.
2. Douglas-Klotz, N. Prayers of the cosmos. Meditations on the Aramaic Words of Jesus. 1990. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco. page 1.
3. Translated by Dr. Neil Douglas-Klotz from the Aramaic into English. www.abwoon.org, Accessed 26 March 2009.

Risk takers needed in the City

Alistair Campbell once famously stopped an interview with a journalist when Tony Blair was asked about his religious beliefs by interjecting 'We don't do God.' Campbell did not feel that God played well with voters and it seems an accepted fact in UK politics that faith is a subject best avoided. The same is true for the workplace. Witness, for example, the debate sparked by the BA check-in attendant who was forced to take unpaid leave for refusing to conceal a cross worn around her neck.

In the City of London, and particularly within the banks, any overt demonstration of faith is similarly discouraged. With their international clients and employees, the banks operate as faith free zones. If faith does impede on the workplace, it is for commercial reasons, e.g. the origination of Sukuks. Just as religion does not play well with voters, there is a perception in the City that faith does not play well with clients because of the risks that offence might be caused and business lost. Given such constraints, the question must be asked: how should the Church take mission to the City workplace?

The City has many centres of spirituality and faith: St. Paul's Cathedral, Wren's 'city churches' and the London City Mission to name a few. Yet to what extent do these actually take God's mission into the workplace? The answer is that they do not and cannot. Employees must do that. However, for employees to do so effectively, they must adopt a behaviour that one rarely sees in any definition of mission: they must take risks.

If people in the workplace are to proclaim the good news, or to help nurture new believers, or to respond to human needs by giving loving service or even to seek to transform unjust structures in society and to care for creation

(Anglicanism's five marks of mission), they must take the risk of being explicit about their faith at work.

The church may publish as many bible verses on the side of London's buses as it sees fit or sponsor endless rounds of lively discussion to bring a Christian voice to current debates (St. Mary Le Bow's Cheapside lectures). Real progress in taking mission into the workplace will only be made if employees are willing to have the courage to talk about their faith and to demonstrate that their behaviour – be it concern for the environment or commitment to showing kindness and love to others – is informed by their desire to help bring others into a wider loving relationship with God.

For the past year, I have attended a number of the Cheapside debates, held very near to where I work at St. Mary Le Bow and on each occasion have invited colleagues. Some subjects, such as the implications of recent embryology legislation, have appealed more than others, but the colleagues who have taken me up have enjoyed visiting the historic church that they pass each day. They have also enjoyed listening to the arguments expounded there and our own conversations have inevitably turned to matters of faith, to the existence of God, and in some cases to what God's mission might be. However, such 'openings' for mission are hard to come by; colleagues are busy and those who do attend tend to shy rapidly away from faith-based discussion when back at their desks.

It was with some trepidation then that I recently returned to work from a lunchtime Ash Wednesday service wearing the sign of the cross. If I am honest, I contemplated rubbing it off as I know how my employer feels about overt demonstrations of faith at work, but I resisted. I took a risk and I am glad that I did because the cross on my forehead did not just elicit conversations about Lent and faith with close colleagues but also with people whom I simply say hello to each day. I discovered that there are several Christians on my floor, I spoke to a colleague who had lost her faith some years ago about her own battles, and I even spent some time

that afternoon helping a visiting colleague to find a church where he could receive ashes.

Since then, these conversations have continued. I have become closer to my colleagues, and my own faith has grown stronger as we have shared our faith stories. More importantly, I have learned a key lesson: in order for more people in the workplace to grasp how wide and long, high and deep is the love of Christ, the Church needs risk takers.

Jack Dunn

Manor Philbeach Light Opera

John Barker's operatic society (now called Manor Philbeach Light Opera) is presenting 'A Feast of Three Cantatas' (namely *Wind in the Willows* by John Rutter, *Captain Noah & his Floating Zoo* by Michael Flanders & Joseph Horowitz, and *Trial by Jury* by Gilbert & Sullivan) on Saturday 23 May at 7.30pm at The Lund Theatre, University College School, Frognal, London NW3. Tickets £10 (£8 concessions) available from John or from the 'Box Office' at 020 7328-7846.

Christian Aid Week at St Marys: Supper Parties

Joanna Hackett, St Mary's Christian Aid rep, will be hosting two supper parties during Christian Aid Week. The dates are Wednesday 13 May and Saturday 16 May. The cost of the meal is £15 per person and there is a sign up sheet at the back of church. Please come along to one of the evenings to help raise money for this important charity and to see friends and make new ones at St Mary's. Address: Flat 3, 300 Fulham Road, at 7.30pm.

If you would like to hold your own event in aid of Christian Aid, why not invite some friends or neighbours round for a meal or see www.christianaid.org.uk for more inspiration in planning events. Joanna will happily collect any donations or monies raised and forward these to Christian Aid as part of St Mary's contribution.

Lastly, if you are free during the day on Tuesday 12 May to help with the 'rattling of tins' at Gloucester Road underground station, Joanna would love to hear from you! Thank you.

Joanna Hackett 07720 850 482

Welcome Sermon from our New Bishop, Paul Williams at St Mary Abbots Church, Wednesday 1 April 2009

Matthew 26:6-13

The first and perhaps most important thing I want to say tonight is 'thank you'. Thank you for being here this evening and for the kind welcome and support you've already provided through your prayers and the greetings we've received as a family. Thank you as well to those here who represent the different organisations and bodies that serve the people of West London – in local government, in schools, in hospitals, in policing, in prisons, in community projects all across the Area, as well as business and commerce. Your partnership with the church in London I know is deeply appreciated – and many of you are engaged as committed members of the church as well.

I want to take a moment to record my particular gratitude to those who have so effectively steered and sustained the ministry of the Episcopal Area during the past year – and especially my warmest thanks to Archdeacon Stephan, Maureen Burton, and all who form part of the Area Team. I now look forward to learning from you and sharing with you the extraordinary adventure of Christ – as together we seek to fulfil Christ's great commission to make disciples of every nation. What is more, we get to do this in a city where nations gather in high counsel and where the persecuted come for refuge and the weak look for shelter and where bright minds converge and big dreams are considered.

There's no question that the church in 21st Century London finds itself in a location that's uniquely strategic in the kingdom purposes of God for our planet.

Today and tomorrow in this city 20 of the most powerful people in the world are meeting to seek some common approach to tackling the global economic trauma that's besieging us.

And later in our service we'll pray for the outcome of those important discussions.

But in churches and chapels and in homes and halls all across this city the people of God meet day by day to worship and work and weep for the release of the incomparable power of the Spirit of God – so that God's indestructible love and his everlasting hope might touch the lives of every person in every street and renew and strengthen the character of every institution in every borough.

And so with that in mind I have one question for us to reflect on in our worship this evening:

What kind of church will it take to renew our world and bring glory to Jesus in 21st Century London?

The answer to that is profoundly simple: only a church that will be joyfully and extravagantly devoted to the person of Jesus Christ.

This is what we see displayed in Matthew 26. It's a chapter that opens with the final instigation of the plot to kill Jesus and closes with Peter's spineless denial. In between we read about Judas' betrayal, the Lord's final Supper, the lonely prayers in Gethsemane, the night-time arrest, and the show-trial before the Sanhedrin.

And this evening's reading sits right in the heart of this very intense narrative of events.

All the disciples are together on this occasion in a small town called Bethany – friends and supporters of Jesus, each one with a growing awareness of the threat on Jesus' life. Then suddenly into the picture walks an unnamed woman, she approaches the table where Jesus is reclining, and begins to pour over his head a very expensive perfume.

Now it wasn't uncommon for guests at a banquet to be anointed, especially a deeply

respected rabbi, but the use of an oil that Mark and John identify as 'nard' is an extraordinary extravagance. This would very likely have been imported from India and cost over 300 denarii per alabaster jar – that corresponds to approximately £20k in modern terms.

During an evening when conversations among the disciples will have been gravely intense – this intrusion is not only unwelcome it's also an outrage. Matthew tells us the disciples 'were indignant' – away from the table some even begin to round on the woman, and all the talk now is about the terrible waste. 'Just think what good could have been done with £20k – what a foolish, untimely, self-preoccupied thing to do.' Would you or I have reacted any differently? This was money down the drain.

Then comes yet another sudden surprise in the adventure of following Jesus: Matthew tells us, in verse 10, "Aware of this, Jesus said to them, 'Why are you bothering this woman? She has done a beautiful thing to me.'"

The word beautiful can also be translated 'truly noble'. You can imagine the stillness in the house at that moment, as the disciples try to re-orientate their feelings from spluttering indignation to muted admiration. Jesus then continues, "She has done a noble, beautiful thing. The poor you will always have with you, but you will not always have me."

So our question this evening is refined to this: *When Jesus looks at your life and my life, and when Jesus looks at his church, what does he applaud as a beautiful and noble thing?*

Every disciple of Christ in the Kensington Area – from the tiniest child to the very oldest is called to a life of extravagant devotion to the person of Christ and to the cause of his advancing kingdom.

So during a time of 'recession' my first message to the people of God in West London is focused on a biblical call to outrageous extravagance. But by this I'm not suggesting that every PCC pass a motion to serve Bollinger at all future church events or the synod approve the purchase of a Masserati

for the use of the Archdeacon. There is a distortion of the gospel that leads some churches in that direction and it really is an outrage.

But what Jesus is doing here is applauding the heart of a woman whose actions convey an extravagant and uncomfortable devotion to Jesus and the values of his kingdom. At least in Jesus' mind her deed was a final preparation for the moment in history when he would reveal the full extent of his glory on the cross. Jesus explains in verse 12, "*When she poured this perfume on my body, she did it to prepare me for burial. I tell you wherever this gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.*"

What then is the character of this extravagant devotion to Jesus and his kingdom? What does it look like?

Well, it certainly includes these three ingredients: *Extravagant Loving, Extravagant Generosity, and Extravagant Creativity.*

All three of these qualities are reflected in the unsettling actions of this unnamed woman. But she glides so briefly in and out of the biblical narrative that it's possible to dismiss her as a person easily overwhelmed by emotion – perhaps a little unstable and prone to exhibitionist behaviour, one of life's eccentrics – certainly not a model of reasonable, well-healed 21st century western Christianity.

But remember this brief encounter sits within a far grander story – and her actions are like a flickering and stammering trailer introducing the main film that's about to follow.

Extravagant Loving, Extravagant Generosity, and Extravagant Creativity.

Do you see it? Because of course this is the signature of our God – and the Servant King will soon display the fullness of loving, generous, creative extravagance in order to redeem the world from sin, and win a decisive victory over death, and establish a new kind of kingdom where his love reigns.

And if this is the signature of our loving Saviour then it should also be the signature of his people – of every follower of Christ and of every church in every nation. This is the kind of church that can go on changing a city and transforming a broken world.

A church that will be extravagantly LOVING in its relational life – locally and across deanery and diocese. When people attend our services, our PCCs, our mid-week activities, are they compelled to say 'see how they love one another.' That doesn't mean hiding our differences but working through them with bonds of deep affection. Then together discovering new ways to extend vast mountains of grace into family life, and into neighbourhoods, and towards those who feel far from God.

But also a church that will be extravagantly GENEROUS in its commitment to the poor – with a local and global vision for challenging injustice and alleviating poverty.

Jesus' comment in Matthew 26 was not a shrug of the shoulders towards the poor – but it was a reminder that self-righteous indignation can at times distort our values and blind us to the unique redeeming work of Christ.

That's why our partnership with the church in Angola and Mozambique is so special – because we get to serve the poor through communities that also bear witness to the transforming power of the gospel.

Then thirdly *a church that will be extravagantly CREATIVE in its mission to the world.* The whole universe testifies to the extraordinary creativity of the God we worship. And when he calls us to follow him it's never a life-sentence to dull mediocrity or colourless Christianity. The church of Jesus Christ should be extravagantly creative – and especially when it comes to making disciples of children and young people. I am so thankful for the unique ministry we have to 50,000 children and their families through our church schools in London.

And then there's the precious work that's undertaken each week by hundreds of dedicated volunteers serving in Sunday schools all across the Area. This is not a side-show but a centre-stage ingredient in our shared mission – it's why I shall spend my first Sunday as Bishop of Kensington teaching 5-11 year olds in a Sunday School and I look forward to supporting this vital ministry in every parish, and assisting its development.

Extravagant Loving, Extravagant Generosity, and Extravagant Creativity – what the world might call foolish and wasteful Jesus calls truly noble and beautiful.

This is the story of the church in London – it stretches back over many centuries, and every chapter contains hidden heroes alongside familiar saints. In 2012 the Olympic flame will come to our city and we shall have some fun. But this day in 2009, and every day the Lord grants us, we carry a torch whose light no amount of economic trauma can extinguish and no personal hardship ever put out. *Thank you for your torch bearing ministry.*

We are very pleased to be joining you and look forward to sharing this great race with the Bishop of London and all the clergy and people of this Diocese, to see the light of Christ continue transforming our city one life after another. And as we share this adventure we shall have the joy of hearing the new songs that the Spirit is writing on human hearts in every nation.

Bishop Paul Williams, Bishop of Kensington

Thursday Lunch Club 14 May 2009

Cathy Mandaza, Manager of Homeshare Services, will be explaining the work carried out by *Vitalise Homeshare*. This is a voluntary organisation that operates across London. It finds volunteers to live with and provide help to an older person. In exchange for free accommodation, the volunteers provide companionship, practical help e.g., cooking, shopping and light housework, as well as providing security and companionship

St. Mary's Church Wardens and new PCC members

At the Annual Parochial Church Meeting on Thursday 30 April, Mark Nichols and Leo Fraser-Mackenzie were elected as wardens, Arthur Tait having retired.

Those standing down from the PCC were: Grahame Challen, Deborah Challinor, Carolyn O'Driscoll and Leo Fraser-Mackenzie

Those elected onto the PCC in their place were: Tara Bromley, Antony Bryceson, Christopher Fowkes and Mary Lewis. They join the current members of the PPC: Fiona Brown, Jack Dunn, Sheila Gibbs, Margaret Geier, Brian Hallock, Pauline Stephens and Helen Trafford.

At the meeting Ginny thanked Arthur Tait and the outgoing PCC members for their hard work and support and welcomed Leo Fraser-Mackenzie as the new warden, and the new members of the PCC.

A Stranger and a Pilgrim

This is the story of a young Dutchman in England, a sermon that he preached, and what happened to him afterwards. He was born in March 1853, in a village near Breda in the southern Netherlands, where his father was a minister of the Dutch Reformed Church, and was christened Vincent. After being taught at home by a governess till the age of eleven he was sent away to boarding school, which he seems to have hated. As soon as he was fifteen, he left abruptly and hung around at home for a year. His later comment was 'My youth was gloomy and cold and sterile'. He must have been a pain.

Things then improved dramatically. In the summer of 1869 he was apprenticed to an uncle, also called Vincent, who managed an art gallery in The Hague. The young Vincent, by now 16, did well. He stayed at the gallery for four years and his boss wrote to his parents saying 'everybody liked to deal with him: art lovers, customers and painters alike'. His uncle decided it was time to broaden his horizons, and he was posted to the London branch, with premises in Southampton Street, just south of Covent Garden. For the first year Vincent was in high spirits. He was still doing well, got a pay rise and already, at the age of 20, was earning

more than his father. It was the happiest year of his life. He had lodgings at Brixton, and part of his joy came from falling in love with his landlady's daughter Eugenie Loyer, but she turned him down, having become secretly engaged to a previous lodger. On August Bank Holiday 1874 things came to a head and Vincent left abruptly. Later he wrote:

What kind of love did I feel when I was twenty ... I wanted only to give, but not to receive. Foolish, wrong, exaggerated, proud, rash ... I made that mistake once: I gave up a girl and she married another, and I went away, far from her, but kept her in my thoughts always. Fatal.

He moved in fact only about a mile to Kennington Road, but the consequences were indeed fatal. He became depressed, introverted and awkward. He began to resent the way art was being commercialised and took to advising customers against buying pictures he disliked. A spell in the Paris branch brought no improvement and at the end of March 1876, after seven years with the firm, he was asked to resign.

By this time his letters had become peppered with biblical quotations and his next thought was to seek a post in the church. Back in London and being quite unqualified, the nearest thing he could find was a lowly-paid teaching post in Isleworth. The headmaster was a Congregationalist minister with a church at Turnham Green. Vincent was able to help there, also at the Methodist Church at Richmond. It was there, on 19 October 1876, that he preached his first sermon. We have the text in manuscript and here are some extracts:

He took as his text Psalm 119, verse 19:

'I am a stranger in the earth, hide not thy commandments from me'. It is an old faith and a good faith that our life is a pilgrim's progress – that we are strangers in the earth but we are not alone because our Father is with us.

He went on to stress that 'sorrow' is a

part of life and can be a blessing in disguise:

Sorrow is better than joy – and even in mirth the heart is sad – and it is better to go to the house of mourning than the house of feasts, for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better.

He then continued with a plea that even death should not be feared: *Slowly but surely the face that once had the early dew of morning gets its wrinkles and the eyes that once beamed with youth and gladness speak of a sincere, deep and earnest sadness ... the hair turns grey or we lose it – ah – indeed we only pass through the earth, we only pass through life, we are strangers and pilgrims in the earth.'*

Towards the end of the sermon he described a picture he was fond of, called 'God Speed'. It had been painted two years earlier by George Boughton and he describes:

Through the landscape a road leads to a high mountain far, far away. On the top of that mountain is a city whereon the setting sun casts a glory.

On the road walks a pilgrim, staff in hand. He has been walking for a good long while already and he is very tired. And now he meets a woman, a figure in black that makes one think of St. Paul's words 'As being sorrowful yet always rejoicing'.ⁱ That angel of God has been placed there to encourage the pilgrims and answer their questions. And the pilgrim asks her: 'Does the road go uphill all the way?' and the answer is 'Yes to the very end'. And he asks again: 'And will the journey take all day long? And the answer is: 'From morn till night my friend'ⁱⁱ

He finishes with a simple repetition of his theme:

When every one of us goes back to daily things and daily duties, let us not forget – that things are not what they seem, that God by the

things of daily life teaches us higher things, that our life is a pilgrim's progress and that we are strangers in the earth, but that we have a God and Father who preserveth strangers, and that we are all brethren. Amen.

Coming from a tousled young man with a heavy Dutch accent this sermon probably impressed the congregation. It is on the long side, even by Victorian standards, and rambles, but there is no mistaking its sincerity. It shows a wisdom (and sadness) beyond his years. His outlook was truly ecumenical, taking in Anglican, Roman Catholic and Baptist Churches and Spurgeon's Metropolitan Tabernacle at Elephant and Castle. As he explained 'It is not really a matter of dogma, but of the spirit of the Gospel, and I find this spirit in all churches'. Well-read in the bible and spiritual literature, fluent in three languages, of good family and longing 'to preach the gospel everywhere', he seemed to have a bright future as an evangelist.

At Christmas 1876 he went home and worked in a bookshop, but spent most of his time either doodling, or translating passages from the Bible into English, French and German. In May 1877, hoping to help him to become a pastor, his family sent him to [Amsterdam](#) where he lived with his uncle Jan, a rear admiral, and studied Greek and Latin for the University entrance exam with another uncle Johannes, a respected theologian. He failed the exams, and in July 1878 took a three-month course at a Protestant missionary school near [Brussels](#). Again he failed.

These failures did not discourage him. In January 1879 he took a temporary post as a missionary in the [coal](#)-mining district of [Borinage](#) in [Belgium](#), among some of the most wretched and hopeless people in Europe. Taking Christianity to what he saw as its logical conclusion, he opted to live like those to whom he preached, sharing their hardships to the extent of sleeping on straw in a small hut at the back of the baker's house where he was billeted. The baker's wife used to hear Vincent sobbing all night in the little hut. His choice of squalid living conditions did not endear him to the church authorities, who

dismissed him for 'undermining the dignity of the priesthood.' He moved for a while to a nearby village, lodging with a miner and working freelance as an evangelist, but the miners of the Borinage ignored him. 'There may be a great fire in the soul', he wrote, yet no one ever comes to warm himself at it and the passers by see only a wisp of smoke coming through the chimney and go along their way'. Finally he gave in to pressure from his parents and went home, but became of increasing concern and frustration to them. There was conflict between Vincent and his father, who made enquiries about having him committed to a lunatic asylum.

In July 1980, aged 27, he made a fateful decision. 'In spite of everything I shall rise again: I will take up my pencil. From that moment everything has seemed transformed for me.' Having failed in commerce and as an evangelist, he threw himself whole-heartedly into his new career as artist. The rest of the story is quickly told because it is so well known: he is of course Vincent van Gogh. Up to that point his drawings had shown little talent, but in the next five years he made remarkable progress, sticking to the rural scenes familiar to him and painting in dark and gloomy colours. This period culminated in one undisputed masterpiece, the 'Potato Eaters' (April 1885). Then, influenced by the Impressionists (and to a lesser extent the Japanese) he developed a uniquely personal and original style, using bright colours, broad brush strokes and swirling shapes. He began working with frantic energy. After another five years he had produced some 900 paintings and 1,100 drawings; most of the best-known in the last two years, at a time when he was in and out of mental hospitals. Clearly he suffered from bi-polar disorder (manic depression); and other diagnoses have included syphilis, poisoning from swallowed paints and temporal lobe epilepsy, aggravated by malnutrition, overwork, insomnia and absinthe. During the whole of this period he was supported financially and emotionally by his younger brother Theo, who worked for the same art firm, Messrs Goupil & Co., which Vincent had belonged to.

On 27 July 1890, aged 37, Vincent committed suicide very clumsily by shooting himself in the stomach, and died two days later in Theo's arms. He had sold only one picture - a few months before he died. Today, his paintings are some of the most popular and admired images in western art, and among the most expensive ever sold at auction. The tortured portrait of Dr Gachet, his psychiatrist (who he thought was 'sicker than I am'), also painted in 1890, sold in 1990 for the then record price of \$82.5 million. Van Gogh thus belongs in my series of godly men (the previous two were Gerard Manley Hopkins and Gregor Mendel) whose work was so far ahead of their time that it was unrecognised till years after they died.

Van Gogh saw life as a pilgrimage. He rarely stayed anywhere for more than a few months. His purpose was 'to realise great things for humanity'.ⁱⁱⁱ When he preached his first sermon he saw this in religious terms. Later he wrote 'to try to understand the real significance of what the great artists, the serious masters, tell us in their masterpieces, that leads to God; one man wrote or told it in a book; another in a picture.' A 'serious master' would make him a good epitaph.

Hugh Beach

References

² 2 Corinthians 6:10.

² He is quoting here, not entirely accurately, from his favourite poem 'Up-Hill' by Christina Rossetti.

³ Quoting Ernest Renan (1823-1892) French philosopher.

**Contributions for the June Clarion
should be sent in to the church office by
Tuesday 26 May**