

EASTER 5 2017

On the day after my licensing just over 2 weeks ago, I decided to spend a serious amount of time walking around the parish so that I could get a real feel of West Wimbledon. I walked along the Ridgway, the Drive, Arterberry Road, Landsdowne Road, The Downs, Edge Hill and Worple Road. I then veered off to Woodhayes Road, Dunstall Road, up to the Common and then back down Copse Hill, Cottenham Park Road and so on. By now it was the afternoon and I realise I had only covered a small part of the parish – so I reluctantly got in the car and drove down some of the others roads. I think I can confidently say I have covered the whole parish – but did not realise just how spread out it is. And of course a large number of you live outside the parish boundary anyway, so I have really only just scratched the surface. But as I walked and drove, I realised how **we** have only just scratched the surface of our community. There are so many people who have not the faintest idea or even interest of what goes on in this lovely building. But that doesn't mean we give up hope or stop trying to chat about what our church, our faith means to us. This past week I had a lovely conversation with a student who told me how much this church means to him and what an important part it has played in his life, particularly in his early years.

But it is hard – hard for all churches to make an impact in the community, to make a difference. Of course it goes without saying that we don't have to suffer for our faith as do many in other parts of our world – but indifference can be as difficult to overcome as can aggression. But perhaps there are some things we can do to enable others to see the difference that our faith makes to us, the difference that coming to church week by week makes. Hopefully we enjoy coming along and we all get something out of it. It may be that a verse of a hymn, a line of a prayer, something that someone says that gives us encouragement. But it's not all about words. Sometimes it is silence that is crucial – and that's something I'm acutely aware of as I prepare what I am going to say each week. One vicar put hot air hand dryers in the toilets at his church and after two weeks took them out. When asked why he said that they worked fine but when he went in there he saw a sign that read, "For a sample of this week's sermon, push the button."

And remember that people do look at us, watch our demeanour to see the difference our faith means to us. For it is all too easy for Christians when they are going to church to look as though they are off to the dentist - and then to leave church looking as though they've just been!

As we continue to celebrate the season of Easter, we begin to grasp that Jesus really is the Way, the Truth, and the Life. But this is not a code of behaviour so much as a real relationship with a person. It is a living, personal relationship that Jesus of Nazareth offers us and hopes we will accept. The relationship will never end, but will continue getting deeper and more satisfying, and continue developing and strengthening us in our faith, through our entire life – for Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life, through whom we can come into the presence of God for ever. Today's Gospel reading is one that is used frequently in funeral services – reassurance for the bereaved that it is Jesus' Father's house to which the bereaved hope and pray their loved one's will be going.

What all this boils down to is that the Church is people and the work we do with people is crucial. It is why we hold great store by the careful preparation of parents who ask for the baptism of their children, the careful preparation for the Church marriage of a couple or the careful support for families who turn to the Church in times of illness and bereavement. We are trying our best to lay a strong foundation for the growth and development of families and their children, something that really is being appreciated, particularly by those families with little or no connection with the Church. Although they may not be putting it like this, essentially what many are saying to God is this: "I want you to be the foundation of my life. I want you to be my Rock".

The image of the Rock is a very strong one in Christianity. Rocks are solid things that make them very strong as foundations but exceedingly painful and obstinate to kick. They do not give. This makes the rocky image which we find in the person of Peter, the leader of the new post Easter Christian community, himself nicknamed the Rock, such a vivid one for helping us to visualise the utter faithfulness and solid assurance of Jesus. Being built up on such a foundation is an exciting prospect for the household of faith. And the building depends on those living stones in every generation that continue to be added.

Like stones, we are to be strong in our faith, a faith that does not merely passively exist but which is fully and dynamically alive. What a Church it can be when it is firmly set on the foundation of Christ and built through his power alone with the offered lives and gifts and sufferings and struggles of millions of ordinary human beings.

But remember one more thing about Peter the Rock, called to be the leader of the Church. It was of course Peter who had badly let Jesus down when he needed him most. Yet astonishingly, Jesus gives him a second chance. Jesus knows that Peter has learnt his lesson. So out of his failure, out of his weakness was born the strong leader. Thomas – who doubted – was another who was given a second chance to be one of those most remembered as he proclaimed his utter belief in the risen Christ. God is always prepared to give us another chance – and it is often when we are at our lowest, at our weakest, that we discover our strength. “When I am weak, then I am strong” is how Paul puts it. “When we reach rock bottom, we discover the rock” is how someone else has put it.

Psalm 18 says this: ‘The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer; my God is my rock in whom I take refuge.’

So take from today the image of God as the Rock – the Rock which is immovable, on which we can both depend (because it is immovable) and on which we can base our faith as the Christian disciples of today, of now.

May this be true for each one of us as we travel our Christian journey together as today’s Easter people, following the one who said ‘I am the Way and the Truth and the Life’. Amen.