

Revd Michael Burns
Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon :
January 28, 2018 ~ “Epiphany 4”

A week before Christmas, I slipped away for the evening and went with some friends to the Wimbledon pantomime: Jack and the Beanstalk with Al Murray – you know, the pub landlord – as the lead star, who I have never really liked very much. It was his first appearance in panto and I’ll admit I wasn’t really looking forward to the evening. However I was pleasantly surprised. In fact he was very good indeed and actually held the whole thing together, always acting whenever he was on the stage. A couple of weeks ago, our Brownies and Guides went – and they said they all enjoyed it too – and again, they said the same – he really held everything together and was something of the focal point for the cast.

The focal point. I wonder what the focal point of Christmas was for you. For some it is the adverts that companies show during the Christmas period. They can take over Christmas for many. I shall never forget a couple of years ago the saga of the lonely sprout, which featured in between programmes on BBC1. An online campaign quickly started up – I kid you not – asking the question ‘Do you feel sorry for the lonely sprout?’ 65% responded yes, poor thing; 30 % said no, get a grip people and 5% responded ‘I still hate sprouts’. But whatever the TV or ad companies throw at us, for some it is still the Christ-child which is the focal point of Christmas. Here, many visitors came to Church and we were delighted to welcome them; yet how things have changed. When I was born in 1953, it is alleged that over 75% of the population went to Church at Christmas. 64 years later, only 4% were part of a Christmas congregation. If it is true, that is a truly alarming, scary statistic. But we don’t lose heart – we carry on regardless, knowing that we must be true to our calling to hold everything together and provide people with a focal point in their lives.

For over 2,000 years, Jesus of Nazareth has been the most significant figure in the history of the world and continues to be so for Christians throughout the world. But I would suggest it has never been easy to be a Christian, not then and not now. Yes, there might have been a golden age once – though even that may not be certain – but to continue to be a worshipping community of Christians in 2018 is not easy. Yet, for many, it is the lifeline in their lives. One lady said to me this week: “It’s my faith that keeps me alive” – and hopefully all of us here today might say ‘Amen’ to that. Although there is a great deal of work that has to be done by many volunteers to keep a place of worship functioning, it is the one hour of Sunday worship out of the 168 hours in every week that is, or should be, absolutely crucial, the foundation on which our lives are lived. Of course I am very aware that many of you devote far more time each week for the work and witness of this Church – and thank God that you do. Like many churches of course, we are

naturally affected by members becoming older and frailer, by those who lead manically busy lives, by those who move to other parts of the country – and also from the difficulty to encourage newcomers to stay. There is no simple answer to these aspects of life – except that we continue to carry on being as welcoming and encouraging to all around us as we humanly can be. Can we do more? Well, maybe. I do believe that visitors who pop in for the first time to see what we are about mostly do receive a good and genuinely warm welcome – although I sometimes think it is not always easy for a newcomer to break into our established friendship circles? Yet despite our best efforts, many do seem to find it difficult, for whatever reason, to come back. So our numbers only grow slightly – which, when we take into account our leavers, can mean our membership remains somewhat static. But that is in common with many other places of worship. Yet the responsibility for holding people together is shared amongst us all – as it is in many other institutions.

Al Murray was just one of a large cast at the panto. In a school the Head and the senior management team together share leadership with the governing body. The conductor of an orchestra is dependent upon every musician to create the right noise – and listen to each other. In the Church of England, the Diocese is led by the Bishop who devolves responsibility to other Bishops, to Archdeacons, Area Deans, Clergy, churchwardens and congregations. We all have our part to play. People say to me from time to time: “You’ve got a good team at Christ Church”. A TEAM. And in my book, the letters **T E A M** mean **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore. A team where every member is valued and has a part to play, remembering the maxim that **T**ogether **E**veryone **A**chieves **M**ore. It is a theme that many leaders used in their Christmas messages as they encouraged people to work together for the common good.

Today we continue to celebrate the Epiphany season as Christmas moves on from being just a local celebration to something much wider – Christ being revealed to the whole world. Two weeks ago I talked about our connectedness to the wider Anglican Church and last week I reflected upon the ecumenical dimension of our faith. This week we launch straight into the healing ministry of Jesus with the account of the man possessed by an unclean spirit. It’s a dramatic story but leads to Jesus becoming a well-known, even famous figure throughout the region. What had caused the man to react as he did? Maybe it was because Jesus was teaching ‘with a note of authority’. Maybe that was what set the man off on a mad rant. Yet Jesus deals with him calmly and patiently and the man is healed. So his distinctive ministry begins – a ministry to the individuals who need his healing touch – and which carried on to countless other individuals during his brief three year ministry. And today this healing touch carries on today through our prayers, through our care, through our compassion; above all through our faith which should be the focal point of our lives and which makes such a difference both to us personally – but also can make such a difference to those around us if they can only see it and if we can only show it and share it. Amen.