

Revd Michael Burns  
Christ Church West Wimbledon  
Sermon : August 18th, 2019  
“Ninth Sunday after Trinity”

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**160 YEARS OF CHRIST CHURCH – TRINITY 9 2019**

“The sky was cloudy but the sun appeared from time to time and it was pleasantly warm on Monday 15 August 1859 when the Rt Revd and Rt Hon Archibald Tait, Bishop of London, was driven from Fulham Palace over Putney Bridge, up the hill on to the plateau formed by Putney Heath and Wimbledon Common. He passed along the east side of the latter to Wimbledon Village and then took the road to Kingston along the ancient Ridgway to where, at the south west corner of the plateau, stood his destination, a new chapel-of-ease for the parish of Wimbledon which he had come to dedicate”. So begins the short history of Christ Church penned by Peter Fleming. All that is recorded in the Bishop’s personal diary is: ‘Monday. Consecrated the Wimbledon Church. I preached on Martha and Mary.’ We don’t know why it was called Christ Church – though maybe because it was to be a ‘broad church’ in accordance with the views of those behind the building of this church – and the title ‘Christ Church’ could be regarded as safely neutral? No matter, what is important is that Christ Church has remained down the years a ‘broad church’, being of the central tradition in the Church of England, favouring neither Tractarians nor Evangelicals but open to all and welcoming to all. As you will have read in the current edition of the Parish News there is one delightful comment I recently unearthed: Christ Church was built to complement St Mary’s and it was needed to cater for the ‘growing number of good class people living south west of the Common’. I hope we can be quietly content to be regarded as ‘good class people’!

Just as we don’t know why it was called Christ Church, neither do we know why the Bishop preached on Martha and Mary. He was obviously anxious to avoid rocking the liturgical boat on a day which was celebrated by Roman Catholics as the Christian feast day of the Assumption of Mary, which celebrates the belief that at the end of her life, Mary was taken body and soul (i.e. both physically and spiritually) into heaven to live with her son Jesus Christ for ever. It isn’t very clear whether this feast was being widely celebrated in 1859 because it wasn’t until 1950 that the Pope decreed its red-letter position in the Roman Catholic calendar. No matter, Martha and Mary it was. It might well be that the Bishop was being very intelligent in choosing that story on which to base his sermon. For we have to remember that some of

those who caused this church to be built – Thomas Devas, John Russell, Thomas Hughes (of Tom Brown's Schooldays fame) and John Ludlow – were all Christian socialists, following FD Maurice and Charles Kingsley. Christian Socialists would have understood the balance between work and religion as illustrated in the account of Martha and Mary. In other words I think, as I said in a sermon a month ago, that we all have the capacity to be both Mary and Martha and that is what we should aim to become. We can be a person who isn't afraid of hard work but also one who is also readily capable of being still and prayerful. Which is why the project to build Christ Church went hand in hand with the project to build the Wimbledon Village Club – one to provide refreshment and sustenance on Sundays and the other to provide – yes you've guessed it – refreshment and sustenance in people's leisure time. What is also interesting to note is that, in today's language, Christ Church might be regarded as a 'church plant'. You see some of those men I have mentioned had become uncomfortable with the ministry of the Vicar of Wimbledon, one Richard Adams, an Evangelical. Hughes and Ludlow are recorded as accusing him of 'being too fond of hell-fire sermons' and had gone so far as to organise their own services in the library of the Firs, a house they and their families shared near the Atkinson Morley site. Even in those days there was division amongst the churches.

Anyway, enough of all this speculation about the early formation of Christ Church. What actually undergirds our beginnings 160 years ago is summarised in the first two lines of our opening hymn: "Christ is our cornerstone, on him alone we build". In building terms, the cornerstone (or the foundation stone) is the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation, important since all other stones will be set in reference to this stone, and so the position of the entire structure flows from this stone. Or it can also be regarded as the stone that holds the whole thing together. If it is not there the whole building could collapse. There are a number of references in the Bible to Jesus Christ, the Messiah as the cornerstone; amongst them Paul in writing to the Ephesians says: "You are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone". So it is right that today, as we celebrate 160 years, we sang 'Christ is our cornerstone, on him alone we build'. And that is the point for us today: we are continually being called upon to build – yes, to care for the building we have inherited – but even more importantly to build up people to continue to be the Body of Christ, to encourage men and women and children to want to join us as the congregation of Christ Church today.

A final word – my apologies to those of you who were hoping that I would attempt to tackle one of the most difficult passages in the Gospels – our reading today from Luke – and who will be disappointed that I haven't. It is a strange and perplexing passage – but I think that Jesus is referring here to the violent death

that awaits him in Jerusalem – together with his glorious resurrection. The three short years of his earthly ministry was a very intense period with Jesus at the centre of it – and clearly stressed as Luke records it. We need to remember that our faith was founded upon such tensions and go forward with a real sense of courage and determination as shown to us by Jesus of Nazareth to run with perseverance the race that is set before us. This building has been described as ‘a powerful composition’ and ‘muscular Gothic’. May we rejoice in those characteristics today as we pray *Gracious Father, revive your Church in our day, and make her holy, strong and faithful, for your glory’s sake in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*