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Christ Church West Wimbledon
Sermon : Third Sunday of Easter
Sunday 1st May 2021

EASTER 3 – 1 MAY 2022

I have long thought that it is right and proper to remember and mark anniversaries. Invariably there are some sad and tragic anniversaries that have to be remembered. In a few days' time I have to travel back to Potters Bar where I have been asked to preach at the Memorial Service for the 20th anniversary of the Potters Bar Rail Crash which cost the lives of 7 and saw 76 injured. That will be a sad day but one which cannot be overlooked by many, including me, who were so involved in its aftermath.

But there have been other happier anniversaries for me. In March I remembered it was 30 years since I shook hands with the Queen at the Dedication of Christ the Cornerstone in Milton Keynes, the United Kingdom's first Ecumenical City Centre Church, shared between the five main Christian denominations – the Anglican, Baptist, Methodist, Roman Catholic and United Reformed Churches. Then last month I went back to my school which I left 50 years ago this summer – it was a good reunion day, meeting up with people I haven't seen for half a century. How we had changed!

For all of us of course, thankfully there are often many happy and joyful anniversaries to celebrate: the forthcoming jubilee of a much-loved monarch, for example – the last jubilee for many years to come. More locally and personally too there are often significant birthday or wedding anniversaries for us to celebrate. Today is one such day. At this morning's 8am service David and Ginny Essex gave thanks for their 50th wedding anniversary and at the 10am service David and Jane

Simpson give thanks for their 30th wedding anniversary. We congratulate them and their families very warmly.

And then I began to think about this a bit more. As I pondered the truth that it is right and proper for us to remember and mark anniversaries, I suddenly realised that this is what the Christian Church actually does year in, year out. The cycle of every liturgical year commemorates events and people in the life of the Church, starting with Jesus of Nazareth himself. So it is that the world celebrates his birth at Christmas and his death and resurrection at Easter. Then in between these great festivals, we learn of his life and ministry as it unfolded and we mark these feast days by our worship together – something that unites the Christian Churches across the world. Then beyond that, never a day goes by when we are not commemorating some saint or another. Some are famous, many are not – but each have their own day when their life of witness is remembered and commemorated in our prayers and worship.

Then of course the parish church is still often the place where families come to celebrate a baptism, join a couple together in holy matrimony and commemorate the lives of loved ones who have died. For a Church of England priest, it is still a huge privilege to be involved in people's lives in this way – even if at a modern wedding, for example, the role of the priest is often subservient to the wedding planner! But it is still a privilege to be involved with such families, an honour which belongs to the Church of England, a church which exists for the benefit both of those living in the parish who do not necessarily attend church as well as for those who do attend.

I'll give you an example. In a few days' time it will be my privilege to conduct the funeral of a 97-year-old man. John Peake was the last surviving medallist from the 1948 Olympics where he won silver playing hockey and who went on to become a businessman protecting his shareholders from the clutches of Robert Maxwell, as his obituary in the Times outlined. Why I mention John is that, as well as a distinguished life, he was also a faithful communicant at the Beaumont Care Home where he lived. He never came to Christ Church but was still part of our worshipping community. People we have known and loved, whether or not they deserve an obituary in the Times, are those whom we commemorate especially on the anniversary of their death, people who have been part of the past and who deserve to be remembered.

Today too the church continues to celebrate and commemorate Easter. In our Gospel reading the disciples again have to peer through their disbelief and incomprehension to recognise that it is Jesus and he performs a miracle to help them along. But this somehow-different-somehow-the-same Jesus also shares their need for some breakfast. Then the focus shifts onto Peter. There's a conversation which he and Jesus need to have – 'an elephant on the beach' as someone has called it. Gently and deliberately, Jesus leads Peter to undo those denials and properly face an act of real commitment. Note that there is a maturity about Peter's commitment now which is quite different from his previous enthusiastic claim that he would never leave his Master. Peter is growing up and his promise is quieter and made with more thought.

The same kind of things happens to Saul when he is struck by a bright light and he hears a voice which stops him in his tracks. For both Saul and Peter there is a direct command. Saul hears a voice saying to him 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.' Peter hears this command from Jesus: 'Follow me'. So, for all of us today Jesus still asks a great deal, as he did of Saul and Peter, two significant men in the life of the Early Church whom we remember and celebrate this morning, as I pray again our collect of dedication and service for the future: "Risen Christ, you filled your disciples with boldness and fresh hope: strengthen us to proclaim your risen life and fill us with your peace". Amen.