

**'Surely the Lord is in this place'**  
**APCM Mass of Thanksgiving 2019**

*+ In the name of the Father ... '*

A man called Jacob went to sleep and had a very strange dream about angels.

When he woke up he said:

*'Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it!'*

How goes on to say:

*'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and the gate of Heave'.*

And he erects a stone on the spot.

**CENTENARY OF OUR PARISH**

A lot has been made of this story from the book of Genesis about the importance of place as sacred space.

In the Church of England, the sacredness of the world we live in and the presence of God with us and among us is expressed through the parish system – whereby every patch of land and every community is part of a parish – and at the heart of every parish is a church – and at the heart of each church has been erected a stone in the form of an altar, that like Jacob, is a response to the presence of God in that place, with his people.

I am mindful of all this, because this year marks the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary since St Michael & All Angels was given its own parish.

You might remember, that in 2017 we celebrate 150 years since the founding of the original mission church in 1867 that later became St Michael's.

But it wasn't until 27<sup>th</sup> June 191 that St Michael's came of age, and was given the responsibility of a parish all of its own – albeit a very small one! I always joke

that it was the part of its parish that St Mary's didn't want! It very carefully included only the very poorest homes of the area then known as Westfield.

Today we are, of course, part of the Barnes Team ministry, and join with St Mary's and Holy Trinity in sharing the love of God with the people of Barnes, but we retain our distinctive identity and parish boundaries.

This is important – because the word parish means 'to dwell beside/with' and expresses that sense of a geographic community living faithfully together in need and in plenty, in sorrow and in joy, in sickness and in health.

I use these words from the marriage service for a reason – it IS rather like being married to a patch of land and the people who live there.

As Christians, we look at the area we live in as the theatre of God's activity, the place where the drama of salvation is played out in individual lives, and where Jesus Christ is made known in word and deed.

The parish system affirms that there is no radical separation between the sacred and the secular. Visions of angels occur to Jacob in an unlikely place in the wilderness, and every place is capable of revealing God's presence.

It is this parish system that reminds us that St Michael's exists for everyone because every place and every person is loved by God.

## **CHURCH AND PARISH**

We are fortunate, that with Jacob, we feel able to say of our church building:

*'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and the gate of Heaven'.*

Because our church is so beautiful.

Many people comment on it often, and if you read our Visitors' Book you will find comments such as:

*'I came from Norway to see this beautiful church where my great grandparents were married'.*

*'I feel blessed to come across this beautiful church. I pray for my sons and daughters, for God to bless them today and forever.'*

*'What a blessing each time I step into this beautiful church'.*

It is a place hallowed by loving association over time.

It is a place where beauty spills over into prayer

It is a place where people feel blessed by the presence of God.

We must give thanks for our building and the opportunities it affords, but we must also remember that the church building is not the parish – that distinction is what marks the Church of England out from other denominations.

We are not the Church *in* England, but the Church *of* England.

We relate to an area, not just a building.

We meet in a specific place, but our people are not just those who come here.

St Michael's is one of 12,510 parishes, and our parish is smaller in both geographical size and population than most – with less than 2,500 souls.

Of these, 58% self-defined as Christian in the last census.

15% were 16 or under at the time,  
with 12% over 65.

Our average attendance across all services in the last 12 months was 124 – up from just over 100 the year before.

Many people who come here live in the parish, but many others come from the rest of Barnes, Mortlake, Sheen and further afield.

The challenge for us, as for any parish church, is both to relate closely to the geographical parish, while also answering the needs of all those who come here from a much wider area.

## **OVERCOMING OBSTACLES**

It's a shame that the word parochial sometimes has negative connotations of insularity and pettiness – often, sadly, because it is true.

Our second reading today came from the Acts of the Apostles, and we will hear from the Book of Acts throughout the whole of Eastertide.

It records the life of the very first Christians, seeking to live out their faith in the Risen Christ, and the opposition and hostility they faced. Today we heard about the Jewish leaders forbidding Peter and John from speaking and ministering in the name of Jesus. Next week we will hear of Saul – later Saint Paul – and his persecution of the Church before his conversion.

The persecution of Christians is just as acute in our own time as it was then. We have all been horrified by the bombings in Sri Lanka, that have killed hundreds of Christians on Easter Day, but it is really only just one of many places in our world where Christians live in fear for their faith in Christ.

As we pray for them, we give thanks that we are unlikely to experience that kind of persecution. However, in our own community, the Church sometimes still experiences hostility and opposition. There are, in every parish, those of ill-will towards the Church and its members, who spread misinformation, rumour and gossip in order to undermine its faith and ministry. Our response must be the same as that of Peter and John – to ignore it and carry on proclaiming with joy the wondrous works of God revealed in Jesus Christ to everyone we meet.

## **INCLUSIVE PARISH**

The inclusivity of the parish is very precious in a fragmented world where many people do not feel they belong.

Even if someone doesn't worship at St Michael's, of isn't even a Christian, if they live in this immediate area, there is still a real sense in which this is their parish church.

A resident of the parish has an historic legal right to be baptised, married and buried from there if they wish to. Although some might call this anachronistic (and that is partly true), it is also an important principle.

In a mobile world, people need stability, which creates identity and community. We might choose our friends and connections much more these days than we used to,

But all of us still have neighbours who save us from only meeting people just like ourselves.

In a transient world, the permanence of the parish is literally a God-send, For God has sent his Son into the world to be with us.

The parish means that anyone and everyone has a priest to pray for them, a community to belong to, and they are held within the geographical boundaries of God's welcoming love.

So let us give thanks today for the life of our church and its parish – people and place bound together in love.

At a time when the Church of England shows some ambivalence towards the parish system, I believe that St Michael's demonstrates the best of what it means to be a parish church. While the word 'parish' has increasingly disappeared from the vocabulary of many people, I think it is time for us to bring it back with vigour and energy, not set it aside as a think of the past.

There is so much to be thankful for,  
so much that God has blessed us with in this place,  
And I look forward with joy and excitement to the wonderful things he will do with us, for us, and through us in the year ahead.

Amen.