

Trinity 13 (September 10th 2017)
St Michael & All Angels, Barnes

CELEBRATING OUR PAST, OUR PRESENT AND OUR FUTURE

'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.'

CELEBRATING OUR PAST

In two weeks time, at our Patronal festival, we will begin our 150th anniversary celebrations that will continue throughout the Autumn . Our theme at this time is *'celebrating our past, our present and our future'*, but the words of Jesus in today's Gospel are perhaps even better. It reminds us that when his people gather together he is with them. That he takes our small beginnings, and if they are filled with love and faith, causes them to grow into something wonderful for his glory.

Back in 1866 the then Rector of Barnes, the Rev'd Henry Melville, requested assistance from the bishop and the people of St Mary's to build what he described as a 'school church'. This was because the area between the railways lines and the river known as 'Westfields' was too impoverished to pay for its own church. This school church was built on the corner of Cross and Archway Street, and it was used during the week for the education of children and on Sunday evenings for worship. The very first act of worship took place on Sunday 11th November 1867, and we will remember this on the first Sunday in November when at the end of Mass we will go in procession to the site of the original church and say there a prayer of thanksgiving.

At that time, the church served this largely poor area of artisans and manual workers, ministered to by the curates of St Mary'. Within ten years, a tin church was put up on the site beside the school, and the St Michael's Mission as it was known thrived and grew until it became a settled Christian community. But such simple and basic buildings were

not enough. The Rector and his curates had a vision for something bigger and better from such small beginnings, and this led to the opening of the current beautiful church building in 1893, and later in 1919 to St Michael's becoming its own parish with its own Vicar.

The story of St Michael's is fairly typical of the time. A mission church established by the ancient parish church at a time of rapid urbanisation and industrialisation. A poor area served by assistant clergy, who worked tirelessly, but with a strong sense of confidence in the Gospel and love for the people of God. They saw a need to reach out with Christ's love, and they did it, and he was with them.

CELEBRATING OUR PRESENT

What was life like for St Michael's in those early years?

Right from the beginning, its tradition of worship was what is known as 'High Church' or Anglo-Catholic. This was a time of great revival in the Church of England, and the catholic tradition with its love of drama, beauty, music, poetry and wonder spoke to people particularly in poorer areas whose lives were otherwise dull and unremitting. Coming to church was an 'experience' of light, colour and sound that amazed and delighted.

Even in the original school church the Altar had a cross of gilded wood, candles were lit at all services, morning and evening prayer were sung by a choir of men and boys in cassock and surplice, and it was the only church in the whole of Barnes to celebrate the Mass every Sunday.

But the growth of St Michael's was not random – it was planned and strategic – and there four clear priorities at the time.

1. The building of a larger and better church building.
2. The recruiting of people to act as visitors to every home in the parish.
3. The encouragement of the choir and the music generally.
4. Ministry among children and in local schools.

In a way, today, not much has changed.

The historian Peter Ackroyd in his biography about London describes how so often there is a spiritual continuity in places where everything physical seems to have changed. Areas having a certain character and destiny that longers over time. *'The continuity of London'*, he writes, *'is the continuity of life itself'*.

These priorities of the original worshipping community are still very much our *'charisms'* - our gifts - today.

The Mission Action Plan that is still in development is exploring the possibility of glass doors at the main entrance of the church to enhance our building and welcome, a community arts project, and a mid-week children's play-group. They relate very closely to the original aims of St Michael's about fabric, community and children – and at the same time we continue to develop our worship so that it reveals the beauty of holiness to all who come here.

But as Ackroyd reminds us, that continuity is contained within the life of the people itself.

Recently I found a letter written some 20 years ago by a former member of the congregation who was at the time of writing very elderly. She had started coming to St Michael's when she was 12 years old, so the letter describes a time very early in the 20th century. She remembers sitting up on the organ loft sucking peppermints while Mr Harries played the organ for Evensong. Later she taught the catechism class, who tried to shock her by wearing lipstick – so she surprised them by showing them how to apply it properly. She remembers that the Churchwardens went straight to the White Hart pub after the main service on Sundays(!) and finishes by saying *'We just loved and lived for St Michael's ... forgive me for boring you, but you can see that St Michael's is written on my heart! God bless you always!'*

God's people are what make a church come alive. Just in the last few weeks we have celebrated an 80th birthday and a baptism on the same

day. We have said goodbye to a server going off to a new job, and a member of our choir is leaving soon to go to university. Yesterday we solemnised the marriage of Humphrey and Sophie, and next week many of you will be at the memorial service for Andrew Nesbitt.

In all these things, in all these gatherings, Christ IS present among us as he promises in the Gospel. And whenever we come together to worship we are joined with the living and the dead in one unending hymn of praise, because, for the eternal God there is no past, present or even future, there is just the immediacy of an eternal NOW. For all time is equally present to God.

We celebrate our present, aware that every community in every time has its tensions and problems. St Paul wrote to the Romans to end their quarrelling and Our Lord himself anticipated such disputes when he gave his disciples a method of settling them. It is easy to love people in general and in abstract, but it is in the particular and the specific that we learn to love.

CELEBRATING OUR FUTURE

St Michael's has been here in one form or another already for 150 years – and may it be here for another 150 years! What will this place be like in the year 2167?

Of course, there will be change, but still some things will I'm sure be the same.

As a church dedicated to the Holy Angels, I feel we have a special vocation to worship God in the beauty of holiness. The front of your order of service shows you a detail from the Ghent Altar piece by Jan van Eyck called 'The Adoration of the Mystic Lamb'. This is essentially what you see every Sunday at St Michael's. At the centre is the Lamb, Jesus Christ, upon the Altar of God. And every Sunday, Christ becomes present at the Altar and held up for all of you to see and adore. In the picture, angels hover around the Altar, just as they do visibly in our windows, and painted on the altar itself, but the angels of God also

hover invisibly around us as we worship. And beyond and before the angels, all around, are the saints, the holy ones of God who fall down in worship before the Lamb. This is you. The faithful people of God. When we celebrate the Eucharist, all time collapses in on itself. We remember Jesus celebrating that Last Supper, that first Eucharist in the upper room of Jerusalem all those years ago. We are here, now in this place, and at the same time, we are looking ahead to the eternal banquet of heaven. Past, present and future become one.

Even after the school church became the mission church they did not stop there, and the Rector, Canon Melville, urged them on saying that what they had '*cannot be considered worthy of the parish of Barnes*'. Our job is to continue that legacy of the past and further it by giving the people of our parish and God the very best that we have to offer.

A church and its parish, existing through time in one place despite change all around it, is a sign of God's faithfulness. We are committed to this place and its people like no other institution or group. When the going gets tough, we do not leave like a business. We do not move away or downsize. We stand in the midst of this community as a sign that God is present with his people and that they are loved. God came among us in Jesus Christ, he came into the midst of life; in a family, in a community, in a society.

That is why the church is here.

That is why we are here.

To be the presence of Jesus Christ,
with and among his people
in the world and in their lives.

Amen.