

Dear friends,

Numbers were down at the 8am on Sunday but this was more than made up for by a bumper congregation at the 10am. at St. Peter's. Together comfortably over 100, I ran out of wafers at communion (almost unheard of) and had to break the last ones up to make sure everyone communicated. We heard a lovely presentation by Rev. Jean Burrows detailing her 3-month long trip to the seminary in Tanzania. Most notable were the social and cultural differences between the UK and Tanzania, where unlike the UK, people rarely live as long as we do resulting in a much younger demographic but I was also struck by the cultural divisions between men and women. Even mourning is done separately, with the grieving mother in the house being consoled by a steady stream of women to comfort her, and the husband outside the house being similarly consoled by a stream of men. At the end of the service, the "Funfaith" children appeared with their teachers to present their work on Noah's ark, which brought the service to a pleasing end.

A few conversations after the service coalesced around the question of "How is St. Peter's growing when we should by all logic be declining?" Demographically speaking we have a high turnover because of "natural causes" so should be in decline. But the opposite is happening. Looking back, Covid hit many churches hard, but by never giving in to hysteria and always remaining open when everyone else closed their doors we unconsciously set the scene. I put it down largely to offering a high-quality product consistently. For this I primarily want to thank all the retired priests who offer their services without complaint all through the year, superbly corralled by our excellent administrator followed by a wonderful musical team of musicians and singers. These are ably supported by a large and complex network of servers, sidesmen, readers, intercessors and everyone else that contributes to making sure we offer this consistent, high quality way of enabling people to access the Grace of God. Long may it continue.

Sunday 26th December – Christ the King

This Sunday Reverend Colin Randall will be presiding at both services at St. Peter's, and I will be presiding at All saints and St. Michael's at 9.30am and 11am respectively. The feast of Christ the King is a comparatively modern church feast having been instituted by Pope Pius XI only in 1925 and was meant as a counterblast to the rise of neo-paganism and fascism.

Ezekiel 34: 11-16, 20-24. Kingship has been associated with shepherding forever in the middle east. Pharaohs, ages before, were

depicted holding a shepherd's crook as a sign of office. In verses 11-16, God himself will be the shepherd but in verse 20 the emphasis falls on a renewal of the Davidic dynasty. This is the Biblical underpinning of Jesus being "crowned" the shepherd king many centuries later in a very different scenario of a crucified "king of the Jews" ruling from the cross.

Ephesians 1: 15-23. A collection of Pauline themes that is apt to mesmerise the hearer. The risen Christ raised to god's right-hand rules the church – his own body – from heaven. Because it collects so many of Paul's phrasings and teaching together it has often been mooted that this letter is not by Paul himself but a later devoted disciple of Paul. Not necessarily of course, as this may be just less Paul the ethical pastor and teacher and more Paul the preacher and worshipper, so having a different purpose.

Matthew 25: 31-46. The parable of the sheep and the goats is problematic for those who accept Paul's contention that we are saved by faith in God's Grace because in this parable "faith" is never mentioned once as part of the criteria for being saved. Instead, salvation is entirely by works – whether one has shown compassion to those in need or not. Difficulties with interpretation aside – there is no good solution - the main thrust that can be discerned is that Christ identifies with those who suffer and love for them is service to him.

St. Peter's Christmas fair. This Saturday the 25th starts at 10.30 in the Peter Hall! Looking forward to it!

Thought for the Day

Which of the Christian festivals take off commercially is naturally determined by how much something can be monetised in some way. Hence Christmas with its emphasis on gift giving (however that took off), trees, decorations, with a traditional feast of eating and drinking is "heaven sent" and is obviously unmatched in the commercial stakes. Easter is a poor second with Easter eggs and Easter bunnies now ubiquitous. Lying beneath the commercial opportunities lies the religious celebrations of course – not necessarily in competition with commerce but often eclipsed in the public imagination. I suppose the danger is that while Christmas is so huge it can drown out other Christian festivals that don't have such an obvious commercial angle. I am thinking of Epiphany that comes after Christmas and Advent which starts very soon on the 2nd December. Both run the risk of being submerged by Christmas. Advent used to be the time for "Advent calendars" but the chances of finding one featuring Biblical scenes is very small nowadays – perhaps the concept itself going the way of all non-digital

forms. But Advent as a distinct season in and of itself with its subtle mood and looking forward to the end times, is also losing ground and seen by many as simply a countdown to Christmas. Commercialism affects everything and it can't just be a case of burying our heads in the sand and ignoring it, because it can be a wonderful compliment to the religious season underpinning it. We need to work with it and draw comparisons where we can, while insisting on affording the season its rightful tone of penitence. Purple is the colour, just like Lent. We don't sing the Gloria, again just like Lent. Having a period of restraint and a little introspection actually highlights and amplifies the raucous mood of Christmas. Highs and lows and differences in mood and tone enable you to appreciate the qualities of each season more.

The Prayer for Today is by a former Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan.

Lord, Still me.

Let my mind be inquiring, searching.

Let my heart be open.

Save me from mental rust.

Deliver me from spiritual decay.

Keep me alive and alert.

Teach me, that I may teach them.

Love and peace,

Martin