**Sharpness URC Final Service**

**3rd April 2016**

**John 20.19-31**

A church in London announced it would give iPads as gifts to every new person to visit the church on its Eucharist service last Friday.

The Parish of St Philip Neri in Pimlico is hoping it'll help buck the nationwide trend of falling church attendances.

Earlier this year the Church of England announced the number of people attending its services across the country had fallen below one million for the first time.

A number of churches are now trying out different methods to draw people in

Speaking to Premier Radio, Revd Aprilis Prima who's used similar 'free gift' initiatives in his homeland Poland explained how this came together.

He said: "Our church had a fundraising day earlier this year and the PCC has been looking at ways to add to our congregation size.

"We know it's getting harder and harder to get new people in so thought the free gift might help.

"Our only concern is the current church members using disguises to get a free iPad."

The Church of England is watching closely to the effectiveness of the initiative and has already held talks with Apple as to whether they may be able to negotiate a deal to see this rolled out across the country.

The initiative happened on Friday, the 1st of April. So one can only imagine that if anyone who did manage to find a St Philip Neri in Pimlico and turned up expecting a free ipad, they would have been made to look a fool.

We have tried all sorts of things at this church over the last fifteen years that I have been here to arrest the decline in our membership. Alpha Courses, café church, joint services with St Andrews, special celebrations, Easter plays with the Berkeley players, prayer meetings, meetings in the Park View, open days, after school clubs, all age services. Whilst some attracted some folk, crucially we haven’t been able to increase our membership. The bottom line for any church is the number of committed members it has who will give of their time and money to keep the show on the road.

Maybe we could have done more. Maybe we got the message wrong, the approach wrong? Maybe we weren’t open or friendly enough? Maybe we didn’t have enough faith? Maybe we didn’t get enough support from other churches? The few of us left in the church have been through all this soul searching. We are left with all those questions and what ifs?

But we also recognise that we live in a British society that is radically different from the one a hundred years ago. Most people would regard it as foolish to turn up to church these days whether or not they gave you a free ipad. We recognize too that we have been the casualty of bigger social forces and attitudes.

So here we are today coping with sadness and grief at this final service to mark the closure of this church. Like any grief there has been and will be a mixture of emotions from anger to blame, from resignation to acceptance.

We have just celebrated Easter and walking through the Easter story has linked into our own journey at this moment in time. Jesus was arrested, tried and then crucified. The disciples must have felt that their hopes had been dashed. Their adventure was over. Like us they must have felt failures and experienced a sense of loss and grief. Unlike us they also experienced fear: fear that they would be next to be hunted down, tried and executed.

So our bible reading from John’s gospel describes how on that first Easter Day in the evening the disciples were all huddled together because they were afraid.

Maybe we too are afraid of what the future holds and what happens next. This building belongs to the West Midlands Synod of the United Reformed Church, our regional church governing body. They have put the building in the hands of an estate agent who will publicise its availability and invite offers on it. We are told that process may take until the end of June at which time the Synod will discuss the offers that have been made on the property and according to the rules set down for charities decide on what is the best value for the building. Who knows who will make an offer for this building and what they may want with it. There will no doubt be fears among the local community about what happens next because of the uncertainty.

The fears we have as a church community is what provision will there be for the Christian gospel in Sharpness. Is the church packing up and leaving you to it?

Well the obvious answer is no it isn’t. There is still another church in Sharpness, across the road at St Andrews. As I said in the article published in the Gazette, I’d encourage this community to do all it can to enable the one surviving church to continue to serve this village. Churches need committed people and committed money in order for them to survive. You’ve lost one church. Don’t lose another.

We as a fellowship will meet again at Michele’s house on the evening of Sunday May 8th to keep in touch and pray over what happens to our fellowship now we don’t have a building to meet in. We will try to be open to how the Spirit leads.

And the Spirit of God is the crucial factor. Arguably more so than committed members or committed money. No Spirit: no life.

If anyone is going to go to church in today’s Britain it is not going to be out of duty or convention (because everyone else goes to church). People go to church today out of conviction, they believe they are called by the risen Christ, they go because they have the Spirit of Jesus within them that sets them free to serve and give of their lives as a joyful sacrifice.

These fearful first disciples huddled together behind locked doors encountered the Risen Christ. Jesus showed up and came and stood among them. ‘Peace be with you’ he said. He showed them his hands and side and the wounds he had received. Then he said again ‘Peace be with you’ as the Father has sent me so I send you. Then he breathed on them and said ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’.

The coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost gave birth to the church. Those defeated fearful disciples were filled with new confidence, courage and hope and went out to change the world. Though they were few in number their impact would be massive.

Thomas, known as doubting Thomas, wasn’t in the room at the time and so said he wasn’t going to believe unless he could see Jesus and his scars himself. There must have been some British blood in Thomas: we are known for our scepticism in this country. We don’t believe it until we see it!

Everyone knows, whether you’re a scientist or not – that the dead don’t rise to life. But the Christian claim was always that God did something new with Jesus that has not been repeated since. That offends reason. The early followers of Jesus couldn’t believe it – hence these stories in the gospels of incredulity and doubt. Yet history and legend suggest that most of the disciples ended up dying for their belief that Jesus had risen from the dead.

It’s interesting that the legends surrounding Thomas suggest that he went off to India to preach the gospel. The Thomist Church in South India, mainly among the Dalit caste, traces its origins to him. The dalits are known as the untouchables because they do all the dirty jobs in Indian society – in particular handling dead bodies. This seems very poignant if Thomas, the one who demanded to touch the risen body of Jesus, is their founder.

People will die for their beliefs if they sincerely believe they are true, but people won’t die for their beliefs if they know their beliefs are false. Sadly as we have found in recent years some will also die for their beliefs and kill others in the process.

Most things in life we don’t need absolute proof and certainty before we act in faith. I sense Jesus is alive when I pray, when I read the Bible, in worship and in meeting with others. I believe I have been in the presence of Christ when I’ve seen a person die of a terminal illness but who had confident faith; when I’ve been with someone whose life has been turned around from despair and contemplating suicide to finding faith and a reason to live; to knowing someone who’s been struggling with guilt and is beginning to know the forgiveness of God and the ability to forgive herself. In all these ways I believe I can see Jesus is alive and at work. But I can’t prove it – it always needs faith.

Thomas had separated himself from the disciples and therefore, in his solitude, missed the resurrection appearance. Maybe the writer of the gospel is suggesting to us that Christ appears most often within the community of believers that we call the church, and when we separate ourselves from the church we take a chance on missing his unique presence.  
  
But Jesus did not blame Thomas. The passage does not tell us about how Jesus put Thomas in his place; rather it tells us how Thomas was surprised! Doubt can be the bedfellow to faith. Some need to doubt before they can believe. If doubt leads you to questions and questions lead to answers then doubt has done its work. There is an uncompromising honesty about Thomas. He would never still his doubts by pretending that they didn’t exist. There is more ultimate faith in a person who insists on working through things until they are sure, or at least have enough to go on – than the person who glibly repeats things which they have never thought through, and which they may not really believe.

But doubts can immobilise people so they stay put and hide in their bunker. They are the kind of people who won’t let their children go into the water until they learn to swim.

Maybe this was what was behind Jesus gentle rebuke: ‘Thomas you’ve seen me – I’ve answered your questions – now stop doubting and believe’. In other words you’ve got enough to go on – now move on.

And Thomas did. He doubted in order to be sure and he exclaimed this great profession of faith – my Lord and my God’.

Frederick Buechner, an American theologian writes that ‘whether your faith is that there is a God or that there is not a God, if you don't have any doubts you are either kidding yourself or asleep. Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving.’

The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. who was assassinated 48 years ago tomorrow on April 4th said, "Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase."

We don’t know what is going to happen next. We may have our doubts. Can those doubts and fears like those first disciples keep us awake, moving and propel us, through faith, to take the next step.

Even now you can make that step of faith that Thomas did: Jesus you are my Lord and my God. Are you willing to receive the breath of life – the Spirit of Christ to bring you a peace that the world cannot give: a peace with God – a deep peace that passes understanding? A peace that transforms your life as it transformed those first disciples.

I recalled on Easter Sunday that the angel said to the women who came to the tomb ‘he is not here, he has risen’. I made the point that Jesus is not confined to a building. God is at work inside and outside of church buildings.

Today we give thanks for all that has taken pace inside this building and for the church that has met here. But God is not dead. Jesus is alive. He has risen. He continues to offer his peace and to breathe his Spirit into willing hearts whether there is a church building or not. Now we are the ones sent out from behind locked doors. Sent out as the Father sent Jesus. Sent out with that great message:

For God so loved the world that he gave His only Son that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

May the peace of the Risen Lord be with us all.