

*Readings Exodus 15:5-end, Matthew 6:1-18*

As we prepare for the beginning of the new school year on Monday, Fr Christopher and I have been thinking about themes for the opening acts of worship at St Mary Abbots School this term, for children who have only experienced worship online over the past eighteen months.

We came to the conclusion that we could think of no better way for any of us to address questions of new beginnings, hopes, anxieties, fears and uncertainties, than by looking once again at Jesus' teaching on prayer. Having decided that we would plan both an assembly for the younger children and a Eucharist for the older children this week based around the Lord's Prayer, you can imagine my surprise when I came to look at our readings for Matins this morning, and found that they, too, deal with exactly this theme!

Perhaps, as so often, the Holy Spirit has had a hand in reminding us all, at all stages of our lives, what is important as we approach an autumn which holds great hope and some uncertainty, and, as we look at the wider world around us, a yearning to increase God's kingdom of justice and peace.

For Jesus, the two great pillars of our faith which he addresses in our Gospel today, are prayer and almsgiving, central aspects shared with our Jewish and Muslim brothers and sisters, and with many other faiths across the world.

God calls us to be constantly open to his call and to lay before him our hopes and fears, our needs and our regrets, as we work together to alleviate the fears and needs of others.

Of course, as Jesus reminds us, he already knows what it is that we need, even before we ask.

He may, indeed, know far better than us what it is that we ought to be asking, and as we pray together each week in the Prayer of St Chrysostom, we hope that he will grant our prayers in the way which is most expedient for us – which may not always be the way we expect.

God is also constantly aware of the needs of all of his creation, and of humankind, each made in His own image. Almsgiving – care and love for our neighbour – has been central to Christian faith and practice since the Early Church.

Here in this country, the great monasteries we see lying in ruins today, offered hospitality, healing, generosity and grace to all who visited.

St Benedict exhorted the many Benedictine communities which followed his Rule, "All guests who present themselves are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: I was a stranger and you welcomed me (Matt 25:35)".

The history of St Mary Abbots stands testimony to this teaching, as we know from the story of Godfrey de Vere, whose father was taken in and healed of illness by the Benedictine monks of St Mary's Abbey in Abingdon, and who in his gratitude donated some of his own

land here in Kensington to the Abbot, to build another St Mary's, resulting in the name St Mary Abbots.

It is a powerful and honourable tradition in which we stand, and next Sunday, we shall celebrate our dedication to St Mary and remember together the long history of worship, prayer and almsgiving associated with this place.

In our current discussions around the Mission Action Plan, we are asking one another and the congregations of all the different services, how we may continue to uphold this Christian tradition, as opportunities for prayer and for almsgiving continue to present themselves both locally and around the globe.

This weekend the first wave of Afghan refugees is arriving in the Kensington area, each one in need of care, empathy and practical support.

A journalist friend of mine who travelled widely in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11, spoke to me at the time of the overwhelming tradition of hospitality and welcome which he encountered amongst ordinary people, who pressed him with food, drink, and gifts, even in the midst of conflict and poverty, as he asked them about their experiences. Will they find the same welcome here in the UK, and in particular in the area for which we are answerable to God? Will they be welcomed in their need as though they were Christ himself?

We are so grateful to all those who have already contributed to Fr Christopher's collection of essential items for refugee families who have often come away with nothing and we hope to see the pile in the St Paul's Chapel growing day by day, as we await imminent instructions for delivery to those in need.

It may be that in due course, we shall also be appealing for volunteers to offer a friendly and welcoming face to those arriving after their terrible experiences. We are also very aware of many who find themselves praying constantly as they watch the distressing scenes in the media for the plight of all those affected by this situation.

But it is also important that we take away Jesus' particular message from today's Gospel.

Neither prayer nor almsgiving should be done to attract attention.

Our hearts and our consciences lead us to love both God and our neighbour, but the natural desire for affirmation which lies within every one of us makes it hard for us to pray or to give without anyone knowing, except, as Jesus says, "Our Father, which seeth in secret".

It is not for any individual, nor for St Mary Abbots to be blowing a trumpet, as Jesus puts it, before giving alms, but to do it quietly in the knowledge that this is both the desire and the work of our Father in Heaven and of Christ himself.

Let us rather be like St Teresa of Avila, who prayed,

*"Christ has no body now on earth but ours, no hands but ours, no feet but ours. Ours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Ours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Ours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now."*