

Easter 7

Isaiah 44:1-8

Ephesians 4: 71-16

Mother Emma Dinwiddy Smith

On Thursday evening I was pleased to represent St Mary Abbots at a service as Fr Gareth Wardell, whom you may remember from his days as Associate Vicar here in this church, was made Vicar of the parish of St Clement and St James in this Deanery.

It was a joyful and affirming service, taking place, as it did, on the Feast of the Ascension, as we remember Christ ascending into Heaven to bear our humanity deep into the heart of God.

It was also unusual, in that when new Vicars are generally put in, they are officially welcomed by members of the church and community who don't yet know them.

Because Fr Gareth had already been at the church for more than two years as Priest-in-Charge since the depths of lockdown, these greetings were able to be personal and thankful for all his many gifts and for the way in which he has inspired the work of the parish.

An added bonus of the service for me came as the Bishop of Kensington preached at the service on the very same reading from the Epistle to the Ephesians which we have just heard this morning.

In this sermon (which my computer tells me is my 150<sup>th</sup> sermon at St Mary Abbots!), I shall try to convey something of what he said, which I found striking, challenging and inspiring in the context of our parish, too.

The forty days of Resurrection appearances by the Risen Christ came to an end with his Ascension into Heaven, and we are now in the midst of the ten days in the Church Year when we await the sending of his Holy Spirit at Pentecost, to dwell among us here on earth.

We have spent the last six weeks celebrating our lives as Easter people, giving thanks that Alleluia is our song, and that we are given eternal hope by Christ's rising from the dead.

At Pentecost, we shall re-commit our lives as people inspired by the Holy Spirit, people who as members of God's holy Church, have pledged to follow Christ.

For the past few years, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York have urged us to regard these ten days of anticipation as we wait for the coming of the Spirit, as a time when we should pray earnestly for the Holy Spirit to fill us, as individuals, churches, communities, nations and as a global community, with God's love, peace and inspiration.

Perhaps this year this seems especially poignant, as we are daily exposed to the terrible pictures of the effects of a lack of love and peace, manifesting itself in appalling war, cruelty and economic hardship in so many places.

As we pray for the outpouring of the Spirit, bringing light and hope amidst extreme darkness and suffering, we also pray that we shall be inspired to play a part in revealing God's Spirit to the world.

We have seen wonderful individual examples in this country, and indeed within our community, of people opening their hearts and homes, and providing much needed donations, through both the Afghan crisis and the recent arrival of those who have fled Ukraine.

Fr Christopher is working with groups in Kensington to reflect Christ's compassion and God's instruction to care for those in need, and the very encouraging meeting of our new outreach group last week suggested that there is more we can do, and that we have volunteers keen to be involved.

Not everyone will be called to this kind of outreach work, (though demonstrating the warmth of welcome and support we would hope to find if we entered a church is part of everyone's task), but each of us can offer something special in the service of God's Church.

Every single one of us can pray individually at home for peace and for reconciliation, but it is as the Body of Christ that we can work together to truly build God's kingdom here on earth.

Bishop Graham's sermon, as he contemplated the reading from Ephesians, listing the gifts which Christ left for his people on his Ascension into Heaven, focused on the image of the Body of Christ, drawn together as a body of different parts, gifts and skills, called to serve and to show God's love to all.

The closing paragraphs of the reading speak about the way in which "speaking the truth in love", we may all grow together into Christ:

"From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

In a challenging analogy, Bishop Graham spoke about the importance of our churches not being regarded on a par with restaurants, where, as customers, people go when they feel like it, arrive to find everything prepared, choose from the "menu" the parts they like and then on leaving, give it no further thought until they feel like going again.

Christian faith, and perhaps especially at times of anxiety and hardship like those we face today, is an all-consuming commitment, informing our thoughts, our actions, our interactions with others, and our worship of God.

A number of visitors – and worshippers - over recent weeks have said to us that they can feel the Holy Spirit at work here at St Mary Abbots as we gradually come out of lockdown and re-orientate ourselves as followers of Christ here in the heart of Kensington.

Our Mission Action Plan and our new PCC exhort us to be a place of welcome, outreach and Christian discipleship - by which we mean that we want to learn more about our Christian faith, to deepen our encounter with God, and to shape our lives in ways which reveal our faith to others.

In our reading from Isaiah, God says, "I am the first and the last; and beside me there is no God."

It is he whom we follow, his Spirit which guides us to speak out and act for him, and in return he assures us: Fear ye not, neither be afraid; have not I told thee from that time, and have declared it? Ye are even my witnesses."