

## Father Peters 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Priesting

14<sup>th</sup> July 2024, Trinity 7, Matins

Mother Emma

Forty is, of course, a good Biblical number. It's associated with many familiar stories, from the forty days of Lent, as Jesus was tested and prepared for the ministry which lay ahead of him, to the forty days between Christmas and Candlemas, or the forty days which Noah and his family spent in the ark. For the Israelites, forty years represented a whole generation, like the generation of those who wandered in the wilderness before attaining the Promised Land, and for them the number forty was also traditionally associated with times of trial and of transformation.

Today we have come together to give thanks for forty years of Peter's ministry as an ordained priest. We can see the picture of the young Peter, shortly before his priesting, on the cover of our Order of Service, and we are conscious that Peter has devoted his life to a whole generation of churchgoers, at St Giles-in-the-Fields, St John's Wood, Emmanuel, West Hampstead, the Queen's (now King's) Chapel of the Savoy, and most recently, here at St Mary Abbots. There have been tests and trials along the way, but there has also been widespread transformation for Peter and for all those whose lives Peter has touched and whom he has drawn into the love and service of Christ.

Much has changed in the world, and in the Church of England itself, since Peter was ordained in 1984. Once again, there have been times of trial and of transformation, but the calling to which Peter responded as a young man remains the same. The Ordination Service from the Alternative Service Book, used in 1984, defined priesthood thus:

*You are to be messengers, watchmen, and stewards of the Lord; you are to teach and to admonish, to feed and to provide for the Lord's family, to search for his children in the wilderness of this world's temptations and to guide them through its confusions, so that they may be saved through Christ for ever.... The Church and congregation among whom you will serve are one with him: they are his body. Serve them with joy, build them up in faith, and do all in your power to bring them to loving obedience to Christ.*

Throughout his ministry, Peter has approached these tasks of service and faith development with open and generous-hearted invitation. His choice of Gospel reading this morning, the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story above all of compassion and generosity, is his favourite illustration of Jesus' teaching. The Samaritan was not hidebound by the rules of liturgical purity and respectability, nor limited in his kindness by prejudice or xenophobia. He reached out his hands in open love and compassion. In seeking to "do all in his power to bring his flock to loving obedience to Christ", Peter has always believed in warm invitation and not in coercion or dogmatism.

When we first started to attend Emmanuel, our parish church, my husband and I invited Peter to come and talk to us about the Eucharist. He sat, somewhat bamboozled as we shared our complex questions, stemming on Jeremy's part from his upbringing in the Roman Catholic church, and on mine from a non-sacramental Quaker heritage. After a few moments' reflection, Peter said, "I think you should just feel welcome to come and take part in the worship as you feel able, take away whatever is helpful to you and see how things develop." It was the mildest, but perhaps also the most effective form of evangelism.

Within two years, Jeremy was received and I was confirmed into the Church of England – by Bishop Peter Wheatley, who is joyously here with us today - and only eight years later I was ordained priest myself.

Some of you may remember that when I preached at the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Peter's ordination, I noted that following a service for Peter to mark twenty years since his priesting, every single member of the Parochial Church Council at Emmanuel, West Hampstead, recalled that it was Peter's ministry which had initially drawn them into the church. Whether from a background of no faith, a different faith, a different Christian denomination, or a different tradition within the Church of England, each one spoke of hospitality and warm acceptance offered, of theological questions addressed without criticism, of inspiring preaching and the sacraments celebrated in a way which reflected both God's majesty and his love.

I know that there are many people here from other places in which Peter has served who can tell similar stories of welcome, openness and transformation. Yet Peter has always been aware of the great demands of following in Christ's footsteps for those who bring their own frailties and uncertainties to the task.

Our first Lesson from the first epistle to the Corinthians was read when Peter first presided at the Eucharist. St Paul himself speaks of responding to his calling in the full knowledge of his own shortcomings, and yet he is confident that, in spite of everything, it is the power of God which will speak through him and draw others to the love of Christ.

The Ordination service expresses this same recognition – that no-one called to priestly ministry, or indeed to any role in the service of God, can fulfil its demands through their own strength and will.

*Because you cannot bear the weight of this ministry in your own strength but only by the grace and power of God, pray earnestly for his Holy Spirit.*

We give thanks before God today for everything the gift of the Holy Spirit has made possible through Peter's ministry over the last forty years, in testing and in transformation. We pray earnestly that he will continue to bring others to Christ, but we also pray that all of us may come with humility, generosity and non-judgmental welcome to draw those whom we encounter in our own lives to the glory of God, the love and compassion of Christ and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Amen