

THE PARISH OF CHIRK
St. Mary's Church, Chirk & St. David's Church, Froncysyllte
(Vicar: The Rev A J Rees, 01691 778519)

PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 89 (January 2011)

In December, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to a Chinese activist for democracy and human freedom and human rights. The Chinese government was extremely annoyed, and put pressure on countries to boycott the award ceremony. Notable amongst the absentees (though not surprisingly) were Saudi Arabia and Iran.

The Chairman of the award committee called on China to respect human rights and to free the prize-winner, who is clearly being persecuted for his political (and possibly religious) beliefs. Such persecution is common in Islamic and Communist countries today.

All of which should be a salutary reminder to western Europeans and especially the politically-correct brigade in Britain that our cherished freedoms are to do with our Western European and Christian heritage, and that to think that the beliefs of Arabs, Asians, and non-Christians (especially Muslims) are equal and equally acceptable in our much vaunted "multicultural society" is not only incorrect but also dangerously wrong. How dangerous? Well, look at that Chinese activist, look at the countless Christians being persecuted around the world, look at the inequalities enshrined in Sharia law against women and their inhuman punishments and the refusal of Islam to recognise freedom of religion (and religious conversion, or even atheism). Look at the Communist efforts to remove religious beliefs and human freedoms.

At the beginning of a new year, we need to remind our fellow citizens of our Christian heritage and western European values, and to reassert them in our multicultural society, otherwise it will not be multicultural but monochrome...such as we see in Communist and Islamic countries.

At the beginning of a new year, we need to reaffirm our faith in God who calls us to answer to him for our thoughts and actions, and in Christ who calls us to follow his example and teachings as the way to God and the way to live. Anything else is dangerously wrong.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 90 (February 2011)

The Bishop's motto for the diocese for this year is "Come and see". This phrase was that of Jesus when some new disciples asked where he was staying (John 1:39). And therein lies a sermon about Jesus inviting us to see what Christianity is about.

"Come and see" can apply to us a church members. I can think of a number of things I would like church members to come and see.

Come and see the Family Service on the last Sunday of the month. It is shorter and more informal than our Communion service, but is still joyful worship. There is no sermon, but a short talk or presentation (possibly a discussion): its style and format vary.

Come and see the Lenten meetings being run by the local churches together this year (details on page three of this newsletter). Indeed, come and join in, speaking and/or listening about our understanding of prayer. By sharing our faith we deepen our faith.

Come and see the special services that will be held in Holy Week and Easter (17-24th April this year).

Come and see the different activities going on in St Mary's Church Hall: Toddlers Group, Mini-Lunch (Mini-Market from April), the occasional special event (e.g. a concert on Friday 18th March).

But we also need to extend the invitation to others, that they come and see. And again there are various things we can invite friends to see at church.

Come and see St Mary's Church building during the week – it is open during daylight hours. Come and look around, come to sit and pray.

Come to our church service this Sunday. Come and meet friends, come and bring your prayers for yourself and others.

Come to the midweek meetings and events noted above – join in or just watch and listen.

Come and see what Christ can do for you and your friends.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 91 (March 2011)

Inside this newsletter you will see the notice for the Parish Annual Meeting to be held on Tuesday 22nd March at 7:00pm. We hope you will attend. The following constitutes the Vicar's Report, which is required to be about mission and ministry in the parish:

I have to report first that I did not do any more door-to-door visiting in the parish as so many people are never in, and the response so negligible. Perhaps this year a new "leaflet drop" might be done instead.

The major novelty in 2010 was the "What next" consultation, when you were invited to offer suggestions about the life and work of the church in the parish. Some ideas have already been implemented, and more changes are to come. The "What Next" consultation was based on the Bishop's strategic three areas: church worship, engagement with the local community, and building up the church community.

Some of our church work is conducted ecumenically. One such innovation was the Children's Christmas Crafts and Carols held in St Mary's Church, which proved very successful. We are going to attempt something similar on Palm Sunday to mark holy Week and Easter: do join us at 4:00pm that day.

Sunday attendance at church during 2010 showed St David's remaining steady, as nearly all their members attend every week, whereas at St Mary's the attendance is slipping partly because so many members do not attend every week. This phenomenon, which is actually quite widespread, leads to statistics which suggests that church membership is declining, whereas it is simply church attendance on Sundays which is.

Statistics for the parish for 2010 (2009 in brackets) are Baptisms 10 (22), Weddings 8 (8), and Funerals 29 (34). Behind these figures are hours of preparation and administration and visiting by me.

Finally, I thank you all for your work and support for our church.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 92 (April 2011)

This year, the month of April sees the culmination of Lent, the period of Passiontide, Holy Week, and Easter.

Christians and the Christian Church have always made much of the sufferings and death of Jesus: the gospels and the church's liturgical year are dominated by these events.

On a human level, one may wonder at why such a patently good man as Jesus could end up suffering such a bad death. The answer probably lies in the fact that he was so good, so godly, that people could not tolerate it.

Again, though, his sufferings and death were the result of immediate sin and shortcomings by the characters around the cross. When Jesus said "Father, forgive them", (Luke 23:34), so many people could have been in mind:-

Forgive the disciple Judas who betrayed him.

Forgive the disciples who deserted him.

Forgive the disciple Peter who denied him.

Forgive the Jews who sought his death.

Forgive Pilate who washed his hands of the matter.

Forgive the crowds who bayed for his death.

Forgive the soldiers who crucified him.

Indeed, forgive all of us, for we would have been just as sinful and weak in those circumstances.

So I believe Jesus died forgiving the sins of the world and of all of us.

This forgiveness is perceived by faith, and received by faith. I (like our service books) remain unsure whether God forgives the impenitent impious sinner. It is not simply the question as to whether some sins are unforgivable, or some sinners irredeemable, but that some sinners do not seek forgiveness, or would not appreciate it and respond appropriately if forgiven.

Respond appropriately? Yes! We must show repentance and reformation, and we must forgive others...as Christ has forgiven us.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No.93 (May 2011)

There is a prestigious £1m Templeton Prize awarded every year in Britain which “honours a living person who has made exceptional contributions to affirming life’s spiritual foundation”. Usually the prize-winner is an affirmed believer in God who has done some good humanitarian work. So there has been some surprise expressed at the name of this year’s winner: Lord Martin Rees of Ludlow (no near relative, unfortunately!). Lord Rees is a scientist, a former president of the Royal Society, who works in the area of astronomy and cosmology. But he does not believe in God, and is barely religious....’though not irreligious.

So why was he awarded the prize, when he is not an avowed Christian or God-believer (though he does attend evensong in his Cambridge college chapel and at cathedrals). How can he be awarded a prize to do with spirituality?

The citation included the following: “The questions Lord Rees raises have an impact far beyond the simple assertion of facts, opening wider vistas than any telescope ever could. By peering into the farthest reaches of the galaxies, Martin Rees has opened a window on our very humanity, inviting everyone to wrestle with the most fundamental questions of our nature and existence”.

Lord Rees regards himself as a nominal C of E who is very vague about the doctrines of the church, but appreciates the aspirations of the Christian faith. He is “a believer in peaceful co-existence between science and religion”. “Anyone who does science is impressed by the mystery of it.”

And that is why he was awarded the Templeton Prize: for linking science and religion, for displaying a spirituality based on the mystery of (God’s) creation. Science does not need God to account for creation, but scientists like Lord Rees can see a mystery and spirituality within creation, life’s spiritual foundation, which some people confirm in religious belief, or at least as nominal “C or E”.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No. 94 (June 2011)

Whitsunday falls on 12th June this year, on the fiftieth day after Easter. It was on the Jewish feast of Pentecost (fifty) that the Holy Spirit came on the disciples. The story recounted by St Luke is his *Acts of the Apostles*, chapter 2. The new church calendar and lectionary encourages us to use the term Pentecost but I suspect that Whitsunday is still the preferred term in Britain.

What are we to make of the *Holy Spirit*? First, it must be made clear that this is the Holy Spirit of God. The question is whether it/he should be regarded as a separate third "person" of the Trinity or not, because the New Testament is by no means clear. And if not, then the whole concept of the Trinity begins to unravel. Most of the references to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament do indicate a separate entity, though different authors have different emphases on the character of the Holy Spirit.

For St Luke in his gospel and in the Acts of the Apostles, the Holy Spirit is of fundamental significance. In both books the Holy Spirit is seen as a driving force, as a lively powerful influence of God. For Luke, baptism was authentic only when accompanied by the gift of the Holy Spirit (something that was lacking in John the Baptist's similar baptism in water). Speaking in tongues was from the spirit.

For St Paul in his epistles (letters), the Holy Spirit was more of a moral guide and influence. Paul recognised Luke's description of speaking in tongues through the Spirit, but Paul did not like this, and disapproved of its use in public worship (1 Corinthians 14). Rather, we are to walk in the spirit.

For St John in the Fourth Gospel the Holy Spirit is about peace, and is the quiet inner voice of God giving us guidance in our faith and life. Not for John the dramatic power of the Spirit as told by Luke, but a calm influence in the believer's life.

I am sure all three New Testament authors are right in their own way. Let us share their experiences of the Spirit in our lives today.

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PARISH NEWSLETTER No.99 (November 2011)

The theme of this year's Diocesan Conference was "What is Church For?" The title could also have been "What is Church?".

Bishop Gregory opened by referring to Revelation 3:8 "I set before you an open door". By quoting this, he was encouraging innovation and exploration in our thinking and action about Church. For example, he said, instead of talking about "going to church", we should be talking about "being church" – an emphasis on the church as Christians worshipping and witnessing and working together, rather than the church building (which is often cold, dark, and uncomfortable, and no place to represent Christ or invite a friend to). We should not simply be "restructuring" the church, but "re-imagining" the church, and thinking of new ways of being church.

The visiting speaker was The Rev Robin Gamble, author of many books about evangelism and a Diocesan Evangelism Officer in the Church of England. By his own admission, he is more adept at asking questions than answering them, and he raised the following questions (amongst many):

- Are you a mission church?
- Who is the church for ?
- Is your church growing stagnant, or declining ?
- Does your church have a strategy for growth ?
- Are you more concerned about present members or about potential members ?

My personal comment here is to endorse what both the bishop and Robin Gamble were saying (and asking). Having said that, these questions have been asked before: the British Council of Churches had a Lent course called "What is church for?" in 1986, whilst the Church Growth Movement of the 1970s was challenging us to grow in numbers, in knowledge, in spirituality, etc. etc.

What worries me is that unless church members act quickly and decisively, there will not be enough of us to build a "new church".