

Sunday 31st May 2015 St Mark's, Cambridge East London 8 a.m.		TRINITY SUNDAY – Year B EMBER DAY Fr BARRY WITTSTOCK'S 35th ORDINATION ANNIVERSARY
Isaiah 6:1-9a	Ps 29	Romans 8:12-17
		John 3:1-17
HELD IN THE LOVE OF GOD		

“God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16)

Greetings to Archdeacon Thami Mhlana, Archdeacon of East London West; to the Rector, Fr Barry Wittstock, with Lynden and your family present here today; the assistant clergy of this parish, your spouses and families; churchwardens and parish councillors; lay ministers; leaders of our various guilds and organisations; visitors and friends and family who are here to celebrate this great occasion with Fr Barry; all the people of God here at St Mark's: I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

We know that the Bishop had planned to be with you all this morning, but due to the death of his sister-in-law, and the funeral yesterday in Mthatha, he asked me to represent him here today.

On behalf of the Bishop of Grahamstown I extend our very warm congratulations to Fr Barry on his 35th ordination anniversary. Barry has been parish priest, rector, archdeacon; he has been involved in training for ministries, discernment of ordinands, outreach and evangelism, church planting, oversight and leadership within the undivided diocese of Grahamstown for much of these 35 years.

Barry, on behalf of Bishop Ebenezer, on behalf of the diocese, we congratulate you; we thank God for your many years of faithful and dedicated ministry; we thank God for your dear family, for their love and support.

Lynden, you have been an integral part of Barry's ministry and his journey over these past 35 years; we thank you and we thank God for you. May God bless you and guide you and pour his Spirit upon you.

Trinity Sunday

Today in the life of the church is Trinity Sunday. We have spent the past six months or so telling and reliving and remembering the great story of our salvation: all that God has done through Jesus Christ to bring us to new life and new birth and reconciliation.

Our salvation history begins with Advent, through to Christmas and Epiphany, Lent, Holy Week, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension and finally comes to the Day of Pentecost last Sunday – all the great events and works of God to set us free from sin and evil and death, and to shape us into a new community, the people of God.

On Trinity Sunday we have an opportunity to stand back and to reflect on our experience of God as he has revealed himself to us: God as Father (Creator), Son (Redeemer) and Holy Spirit (Sanctifier) – God as one – which we affirm in the Nicene Creed – and God as Trinity, one God, three Persons.

St Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland, used the three-leaf clover to describe the Trinity: three parts, yet all one plant, which together make up the whole.

This is no academic debate – as we find when we engage at any depth with the Islamic faith, or with Jehovah's Witnesses. It is central to the Christian belief in God, and is one of those pillars of orthodoxy and truth to which we hold. God the Father who created us; Jesus the Redeemer, the Son of God, fully God and fully human, who saved us; the work of the Holy Spirit, who makes us holy, living in us and in the life of the church – these three Persons all come together in the one God.

Our readings

Our readings together show us the Trinitarian picture of God. But they also open up for us something of the wonder and glory of God, his love and compassion, God in us.

Isaiah 6:1-9a Isaiah sees God in the temple – in glory, on a throne, surrounded by seraphim, angelic heavenly creatures, crying out in holy words of worship and adoration; the temple shaking at the sound of their calls, the house of the Lord filling with the smoke of his glory – which we symbolise when we use incense. Isaiah’s response is one of sorrow at his sin and unworthiness; but wonderfully he is touched by fire and his sin is wiped out. He is set free. Then comes the call of the Lord, “Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?” And he responds, “Here am I! Send me.”

God in glory – overwhelming, frightening; for Isaiah it was an experience of wonder and worship. And it was followed by the call from God, and his response, that changed his life. From that day on his life was no longer his own. He became one of the greatest prophets of Israel, called at a time of impending danger and destruction; he spoke words of judgement, hope, condemnation, restoration, and the Servant of God who was to come.

All who have in one way or another heard God’s call and responded to that voice can identify with the call of Isaiah and say “Yes, that was my call also.” It is significant that these verses from Isaiah are usually read at ordinations, as men and women publicly respond to the call of God, and are anointed and set apart for ministry.

Romans 8:12-17 is full of Trinitarian images: the Spirit that enables us to cry “Abba! Father!” The Spirit of God that affirms in our hearts that we are God’s children, that we are fellow-heirs, inheritors with Christ (Rom 8:15-17) – the Spirit, the Son, the Father.

John 3:1-17 the love of God for us, given to us through the Son: “God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that all who believe in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” (Jn 3:16) and the call and invitation to be born again, to have a fresh start, a new life. What a great gift from God.

A new church and a new world

At the heart of the Trinity is love. The three Persons of the Godhead are in this eternal relationship of love. The closer we come to God, the closer we come to the heart of love. “The Spirit you have received is ... a Spirit of adoption enabling us to cry ‘Abba! Father!’ ” (Rom 8:15).

As people who worship the Tri-une God, we are called to be a community of love; a community of reconciliation; a community of witness.

The life of the church, our worship here on Sundays, our relationships with one another, our struggles and heartaches, the way we share one another’s burdens, together make up a picture of God’s love. You as the people of God at St Mark’s share something of God’s love – in your friendships, in your embrace of one another, in your life together.

Our life together is not always easy. The biggest test of our fellowship in Christ and our love for one another is when we disagree and fall out. There are times when we hurt one another deeply, when we wound and damage others with our words or our attitudes. None of us get it right all the time. Let us be gentle with one another. Seek to understand and to reach out. Be prepared to go the extra mile in order to make peace. Let us speak the truth to one another in love. We are reminded of this every Sunday, in the words of The Peace: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another...” And our life in the Trinity means a life of loving, as God has loved us. It means sharing in the ministry of reconciliation, being Christ to one another.

Can we do this? With the grace and strength of God, in the power of the Holy Spirit, yes, with God's help, we will.

And what about our witness? Our life in the community? All that we face as a nation? Every day we wake up to dreams being shattered. Nkandla; the FIFA bribe scandal, after our quite remarkable Soccer World Cup in 2010; child rapes and murder; corruption and mismanagement; dirty streets; a frighteningly high level of unemployment of at least 25% - and many of us here know that first-hand. The upheaval and turmoil of the xenophobic attacks a few weeks back, the defacing and removal of statues, the name changes that are symbolic and vital for both sides, the huge political and social changes that many of us have seen and been part of in the last few decades – where is God in all this? Where do we find and see the love of God?

We find it in one another; as we look past the stereo-types to see the person, also created in the image of God; as we share lives; as we walk together; as we reach out with healing hands and mercy. Being Christ to one another. Sharing the love of the Trinity. The love of God.

Like many of you here, I have been part of the church, and part of the Anglican Church, all my life. Not quite as long as Fr Barry, but getting there. For me, the most exciting thing of being a parish priest is to watch the Spirit at work in the lives of people, and in the life of a local community, the parish church. I sat with your Parish Council a few weeks back, and in the midst of a long meeting I could see how God had shaped you, and I came away thinking how fortunate you all are to belong to a parish like this. And the immense impact that we as the church have on the wider community, simply by following Jesus Christ as people of love and healing and forgiveness and reconciliation. We can share our stories of pain and heartache and loss. We can be vulnerable to one another. We are able to love, because we have received love.

That is what we have as we face the world and experience the trauma of our wounded society. In the midst of it all, we are people who love.

CONCLUSION

My prayers for you all: a prayer of thanksgiving for Fr Barry's ministry in this diocese and in this parish; a prayer of hope that you at St Mark's may be a healed and united community of love; a prayer of blessing on your life together.