

St Marylebone Parish Church
900th Anniversary Service
Sunday 23rd July 2017 11.00 am

There's a sense that in celebrating 900 years, 200 years and 30 years, all your birthdays have come at once! 900 years of Christian worship, give or take a few, under the dedication of St John and then St Mary; 200 years of Hardwick's new church (which was four years in the making); 30 years since the installation of the Rieger organ. Plenty to celebrate at the start of the 2nd St Marylebone Music Festival.

Not that you have been well served by the opinions of the artistic community in the past – being cast for a scene in Hogarth's *Rake's Progress* and having Charles Dickens complain of the cold didn't bode well. But at least you can be content that Robert Browning so much enjoyed being married here that he celebrated his wedding anniversary each year by returning to kiss the church step. Perhaps there's a new ceremonial for the entry of the bishop somewhere here!

St Marylebone does what the English parish church does best. Let's not be too romantic about this – it would be easy to be sucked into a complacent sentimentality about a parochial idyll that does not exist in C21 London – but the evidence of your engagement with education, through the school; with the NHS, through the doctors' surgery; with healing and counselling, through the Centre is plain for all to see. What a proper parish church does – service to its community, engagement with its neighbourhood; facilitation of a bigger vision for society.

It's been heartening, in the midst of the tragedy and terrorism that have struck London over the past few months to see that repeated pattern of churches being faithful to their calling. At Grenfell, opening their doors, enabling communication, undertaking advocacy where trust had disappeared. In Finsbury Park, standing alongside our Muslim neighbours. Repeatedly, being there, because presence and engagement is at the heart of the Gospel.

Jesus' parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13 employ a series of metaphors to help us explore the nature of the Kingdom of Heaven (as Matthew calls it for his Jewish audience – it's the Kingdom of God in the other gospels). The Kingdom is of course a major *motif* of Jesus' ministry. As chapter 1 of Mark's gospel has it "Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying: 'The right time has come; the Kingdom of God has come – repent and believe the Gospel.'" In Jesus, God has inaugurated a new age, an age when justice, mercy and righteousness are lived in a new way, the way of Jesus Christ. God's Kingdom has invaded this world, and the world can never be the same again.

How are we to understand this Kingdom? New Testament theologians depict it as the rule of God, growing alongside the existing world order. We look for signs of God's Kingdom in God's world – and we seek also to bring into being that which participates in and speaks of the Kingdom, knowing that what will last into the Age to Come is that Kingdom which is eternal. Tom Wright is helpful here, as he reminds us that the inauguration of the Kingdom in Jesus' ministry is only ultimately realised through his death and resurrection:

“Jesus's resurrection is the beginning of God's new project, not to snatch people away from earth to heaven, but to colonise earth with the life of heaven. That, after all, is what the Lord's Prayer is about.”

The parable of the weeds and the wheat in Matthew 13 throws particular light on how that Kingdom grows. Wheat – the good seed – is the Kingdom of God. Weeds, planted by the Enemy, grow alongside the wheat, and represent all that is contrary to the life of the Kingdom – the love and worship of money, power, and all that is ultimately futile.

But we are encouraged to understand the life of the Kingdom as that which will last into the New Heavens and the New Earth, when the weeds are burned away. Until then, weeds and wheat grow alongside each other, signifying clearly our commitment as the Christian Church to be rooted and growing within our society in all its messiness – joy and celebration, pain and sorrow. Which is what you've been doing here for 900 years.

Your £8m vision *Changing Lives*, developing a new Community Hub, and the explicit commitments you make in your Mission Action Plan to be engaged with all that goes on in your parish are your response to what it means to live the Kingdom here in Marylebone. The Mission Action Plan commits you not just to worship and grow in the life of the Spirit, but also to offer pastoral care, to engage with the lives of children and young people, and to look outwards to what God is doing in his world.

As we worship and pray, so we live: “Your Kingdom Come!”

Pete, Bishop of Willesden, Acting Bishop of London