

NEWSLETTER FOR FEBRUARY 2011

Events in January

As reported last month, in the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity** we used material prepared by Christians in Jerusalem (based on the passage in Acts which describes the common life of the earliest churches). We attempted a Palestinian chant and a Syriac *Alleluya*, and reflected on the desperate current situation of Christians in the middle East - which certainly puts our country's ecumenical doldrums into perspective!

Christianity was an Eastern faith before ever it became a Western one (not least through the labours of St Paul), and the oriental churches have an astonishing and ancient heritage. Down the centuries in many (though certainly not all) places in the middle East Jews, Christians and Muslims co-existed happily, and their patterns of prayer and worship had much in common - more so, in fact, than do those of eastern and western Christians today: a salutary fact for us to remember in our Muslim-majority patch. But this legacy is gradually being airbrushed out of history by Jewish and Islamic regimes alike, sometimes subtly, sometimes violently, and Arab and Palestinian Christians have left the area in vast numbers.

William Dalrymple chronicled this loss more than a decade ago in *From the Holy Mountain* - 'a journey in the shadow of Byzantium' following the now-faint footsteps of John Moscos, a 6th-century monk [recommended, if depressing, reading], and since then the process has continued apace, in Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel and Egypt alike. (Recent news has focused on the causes of the failure of the peace process in Israel/Palestine, and attention has now shifted to Egypt.) Before long perhaps the only Christian presence in the region will be a 'heritage' one, of outsiders tending the historic sites. That would be truly tragic.

A small group of parents and children from our school were proud to be among the procession of banners from churches and schools dedicated to St Paul at our Cathedral for its **patronal festival** on 22 January. We discovered a handsome school banner, made in the 1970s (and probably little-used since then), though it was awkwardly mounted on an 8' broomstick-type pole, with which the Rector struggled on the 100 bus.

The service marked the 300th anniversary of the rebuilding of St Paul's by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London. Over the south porch is a carving of a phoenix - the legendary bird that rises reborn from the ashes - and the procession included a huge carnival-type phoenix made by one of the participating schools. Below the phoenix is the Latin word *Resurgam* - 'I will rise again' - which Wren discovered on one of the stones from the old cathedral. As Bishop Richard explained, this is not a Harry Potter-type spell (though it sounds like one) but the great Christian affirmation of rebirth and renewal in Christ. At the end of the service the Dean invited children present to stand in a circle under the dome and shout out the word as a sign of hope. The Cathedral hopes to make this an annual event. If so, we must get the banner more manageably mounted!

On 28 January, Deborah Weston, a national and local RE adviser (familiar with our church from her time teaching at Mulberry) led a **Labyrinth workshop** at St George's for teachers and clergy offering ideas for developing church and school links, including school visits to churches, with a particular focus on Easter activities. (On the whole, schools are much happier 'doing' Christmas than Easter, which is the church's primary festival.) The session was less well-attended than the two she has done elsewhere, because of problems with the Tower Hamlets booking system, but nonetheless lively.

She and her colleague Fiona, from *RE Today*, explained the ancient tradition of the labyrinth - not a maze with dead ends, but a single continuous path from a circumference into the centre, as an emblem of the spiritual journey, developed in part as a substitute for those who could not make a

pilgrimage to Jerusalem to follow the Way of the Cross. Chartres Cathedral has one of the most famous labyrinths, laid out on the floor of the nave; in recent years other places have created permanent or temporary labyrinths (including Greenbelt and other Christian festivals). The idea is to walk the path (they used to do it crawling on their knees!) slowly and reflectively - it requires concentration - until you reach the central place of stillness. Typically, and frustratingly, the path first leads you almost but not quite to the middle, and then back out to the edges to make a more lengthy journey round every part of the pattern before you finally arrive. The psalmist says, *O that my ways were made so direct...* but the reality of the Christian journey is that there are no short cuts, and gaining true insight and serenity is a hard-won process.

Deborah and Fiona suggested ways of creating temporary labyrinths in churches, for children and adults to share, and then added to this the idea of 'activity stations' along the way, to reflect on particular aspects of the Easter story, rather like the tradition of Stations of the Cross. (In our area, the finest example of this is the set of contemporary paintings commissioned by St John Bethnal Green - well worth a visit if you have not seen them.) First you tell the Easter story; then you try to 'inhabit' it and make it your own. This, of course, needs to be sensitively handled for those who are from another faith tradition; but there are themes that all can share, such as injustice, suffering, burdens and hope. At the workshop, we 'tasted' some of these - nails for the hurt we do to others, stones for the things that weigh us down, planting seeds with a message of what we hope for.

At St George-in-the-East, we already have regular visits from several local schools - not only our own church school. (Blue Gate Fields are coming this month, for the first time.) There is a challenge for us to make the most of these visits, and in particular to help them engage with the church as an 'Easter place'. Our own school has worked hard at telling the Easter story in a way appropriate to its mainly Muslim intake (using resources from the diocese). We need to develop what we offer to other schools as well.

Save KEMP, and Wellclose Square

Toni Davey, from our congregation, has been one of those working round the clock - including a chilly all-day stint at a stall in Watney Market - on the campaign to save **King Edward VII Memorial Park** (Shadwell Park) from Thames Water's plans to close it for several years as part of the 'Super Sewer' development to extend London's overstretched Victorian sewers (the far-sighted scheme pioneered by Joseph Bazalgette) and reduce water pollution. When it finally re-opens it will contain structures which are out of keeping with park's environment, and may sometimes produce smells! The scheme is certainly necessary, but there are alternative brownfield sites in the area that could be used instead. Many church members have signed the petition and other documents, and we have provided an endorsement for the website <http://www.savekemp.com/> which gives more detailed information. Keep up the good work, Toni!

Last-minute discussions are also taking place to challenge EDF's plans to site a substation on the vacant plot in **Wellclose Square** between the Highway and St Paul's School - currently an untidy storage depot. Curiously, there has been little or no public consultation about this, despite the possibility of other less invasive sites. If it goes ahead, we will lose the last chance of recovering the feel and identity of the Square - seriously compromised when its remaining historic housing was flattened in the 1960's: see this page on our website <http://www.stgite.org.uk/precinctwellclose.html>. It will also have a negative short- and long-term impact on our school. Far better, surely, would be to get EDF to design something more imaginative that would meet their needs but also make this an attractive space marking out one quadrant of the Square - and let the public, and the adjacent schools, have their say. One of our school parents, who is also an architect, is campaigning for an alternative approach, and the politicians are beginning to take notice.

New Step, Lent, St George's Day

Last month we reported that we hoped to get a good quorum for the nurture course, **New Step**,

run by Irena Edgecumbe and the Stepney Area Training Team. Sadly, this has not been achieved - either at our own church or in neighbouring churches on whose partnership its success depends. Quite a few were keen, but because of busy and complicated lives could not commit to two terms of weekly meetings and in particular a residential weekend. So we shall need to think again, and talk to Irena about an alternative pattern. Meanwhile, we will mount our own **Lent course**. Thursday evenings, which we had earmarked for New Step, seems the best time for this - let us know if you can manage this, and would like to participate.

Anyone who feels that God may be calling them to develop their Christian commitment via training and commissioning for one of the various lay ministries in the church (for example, pastoral assistant and licensed lay [formerly Reader] ministry), or indeed ordained ministry, would find it helpful to attend the annual Stepney Area **Vocations Day** on Saturday 5 March, where there will be a range of speakers who will explain what's involved. Each parish is invited to send up to five people, who need to register by 18 February. More details at church, or from the Rector.

Looking ahead, this year we have three 'calendar problems' on which we'd welcome your advice:

the London Marathon falls on **Palm Sunday** (17 April). Every year the Marathon disrupts our Sunday service - even when we meet at 9am we have problems. The organisers don't seem to realise that churches along the route can't just cancel their services to suit their needs! This year is even more difficult, as it interrupts the start of Holy Week. The choice before us is to have our Palm Sunday procession and liturgy at 9am - and then gear up to cater to the crowds (very successful last year) - or, as has been suggested, to have our service in the evening, while still fielding a team to serve refreshments earlier in the day. What do you think?

St George's Day falls on Easter Eve. Church rules say it should be transferred to the first weekday outside the octave of Easter - Monday 2 May. This is a Bank Holiday. So we could use this as an opportunity to arrange some community activities in church - maybe including a labyrinth (see above) - and Gardens during the afternoon, with an early evening service and party for any who wish to come. We are watching with interest the work of the Poet Laureate, Andrew Motion, in developing a 'secular liturgy' for St George, to recover him from the BNP. It looks promising - see <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/jan/24/poets-enlist-st-george-liturgy> - and this is something we might stage during the day. On the other hand, church members and others may wish to use this as a day to get out of London; and the idea of 'transferring' St George's Day will not make sense to those outside the church. Again, let us know what you think.

The third consequence of a late Easter, plus the Marathon the week before, means that we will need to hold our **Annual Parochial Church Meeting** annual meeting earlier than usual - on Sunday 10 April.

Education Sunday - 20 February

The timing of a day to celebrate and pray for the work of all involved in education, in church and school, settled some years ago in the 9th Sunday before Easter, for which the 1980 Alternative Service Book (remember that?) had 'Christ the Teacher' as its theme. Nowadays churches are more flexible with the date - if they keep it at all.

This year there is a particular reason for keeping it. It is the bicentenary of the National Society, an Anglican organisation which financed the building and staffing of an astonishing number of schools throughout the country - both urban and rural - at a time when national government did not see universal education as important. In our parish, it helped to finance the setting up of infant and junior schools under the new railway arches in the 1830s, inspired by the redoubtable William Quekett - see <http://www.stgite.org.uk/chchwatneystreet.html> - and the building of St Paul's Church for Seamen Schools in 1969 - see the equally redoubtable Dan Greatorex' letter, appealing for funds, at <http://www.stgite.org.uk/greatorex.html>. When government finally woke up to its responsibilities, and started to build Board Schools, one of our clergy commented in the 1880s, no

doubt in envy, that while the railway arches premises *perhaps were quaint*, the new schools were *palatial...replete with all the luxuries that art and faddism can supply*.

Well, that was then; but the partnership between church and state in the provision of education remains central, and constantly changing as a result of the present government's schemes.

The National Society has a number of special events planned for the year, including a service at Westminster Abbey attended by the Queen. There is not much happening elsewhere in London, despite the fact it was here that the Society was born. We are privileged that the General Secretary of the National Society (and chief education officer of the Church of England) will be our preacher on Education Sunday. She is, of course, no stranger to us, being our honorary assistant priest - although much in demand elsewhere for the bicentenary, she happens to be available that day!

Congregational News

Alice Daniels has made remarkable progress, feeling strongly the presence of God and the prayers of those who have been remembering her in prayer. We shall now be giving thanks for her recovery rather than asking for strength for her treatment! She now lives mainly in Bristol, where her and Leon's children are at school, but they still have a base in Wapping.

As we write, two members of our congregation are in foreign hospitals.

Danny Ramanoop, our crucifer and much else, suffered two heart attacks during his stay in Lithuania with Gina. He is doing well, and Gina has returned, but when he is discharged he will probably need to be driven home rather than flying. We pray for a good recovery.

Canon **Michael Saward** had a bad fall on holiday in Spain, and requires surgery, which will keep him there for some time. (The Rector has the number of a direct phone line to his hospital bed, and can provide this to anyone who would like to call him.) We hold him too in our prayers.

Congratulations to **Genti Qehaja and Vivien Thompson**, members of our congregation who were married at St George's on 15 January. The diocesan registry was extremely prompt and helpful in issuing a licence, and the ceremony was intimate and dignified, with friends and family supporting them. Genti is an Albanian Catholic, and feels 'at home' with our services.

New bishop and archdeacon

We expect the announcement of the new Area Bishop for Stepney soon, and certainly before Easter. He (for the one thing we do know is that under the present rules it will be a man) will not take up post immediately, but will have a hand in the appointment of the next Archdeacon of Hackney.

Telecoms installation

New Edge Telecommunications (NET) have submitted proposals, including a feasibility study, for the installation of mobile signal equipment in our church tower, and the church council has agreed to consider this scheme in principle - though there are many details which would need to be resolved, since we are a Grade I listed building. It is now out for public consultation with site and other local residents and the amenity societies, and we are awaiting the outcome. Apart from the practical considerations, there may be objections in principle, and concerns about health risks (though anyone who uses a mobile phone is actually at greater risk). But if the equipment is not located here, it will be somewhere nearby, since the need has been clearly identified. Please contact us if you'd like to know more, or have particular concerns.

Safermedia

is spearheading an initiative to require internet service providers to provide voluntary opt-in filters to help block porn and protect children; a round table meeting with Ed Vaizey, Minister for Culture, if planned for 7 February. If you'd like to know more, please contact the Rector for more details.