

NEWSLETTER FOR FEBRUARY 2012

A time of renewal

What will be the focus of Lent for you this year? As always, it's the time when the church calls us to a careful examination of our lives - stripping away some of inessentials that get in the way of our journey with God and our attentiveness to the needs of our neighbours, and making time and space for things that really matter. There are many ways of doing this. The ancient tradition of disciplined fasting and abstinence, to deepen our prayer, which the Church of England commends (indeed, commands), may be unfashionable - though nowadays is taken rather more seriously in many Christian traditions than once it was - but remains valuable. So is taking on an extra commitment - making Sunday worship an absolute priority, and attending midweek services too whenever possible; taking on a piece of voluntary work in the community - perhaps giving extra care to a neighbour in difficulties; and generous almsgiving, to causes and charities that are important to you.

It's instructive to compare our church's rules on the keeping of Lent with the requirements of Islam on the keeping of the fast of Ramadan. They have very different rationales. The Muslim fast from dawn to dusk is a matter of obligation, not of choice; it is rigorous and absolute (apart from those exempted for various reasons); everyone does the same thing; and it a public show of solidarity - patterns of daily life change visibly, and people come together in the evening to break the fast. The Christian church, taking its cue from Jesus who tells us not to parade our piety, and warns that some forms of devotion can be counter-productive (if, for example, they lead to violence - see also Isaiah 58), makes the detail of our Lenten observance a matter of private choice and commitment. We don't all have to do the same thing, we don't have to let others know what we're doing; and we should not let our devotional practices get in the way of hospitality to others. (So, for instance, some who choose to abstain from alcohol in Lent will offer drinks if they hold a party, and maybe have one themselves. This is not a dilemma that Muslims face, since they do not drink alcohol at any time, at least in public.)

Both systems have their strengths and weaknesses. The danger for Christians is that we end up doing nothing, or very little, and equate rule-keeping with hypocrisy. An ethic based on Jesus' way of freely-chosen commitment - seeking to do the most loving thing in any particular situation - is in fact more demanding than one based on rules, if we take it seriously.

In a world where the gap between rich and poor is widening rather than narrowing - particularly in our own country - we need to be aware of those who abstain from food, or pleasure, or whatever it may be, because they have no choice in the matter. That is why almsgiving both to those who are near at hand and to those who are far off is central both to Lent and to Ramadan. Undergirding whatever we do in Lent must be the challenge of the prophets: *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* (Micah 6.8)

January events

Despite the Rector being on crutches - still getting out and about, but rather more slowly than usual! - the last few weeks have been a good time. Liturgically, the wise men arrived on schedule at **Epiphany**; we marked the **Baptism of Christ** and our own baptism the following week, with thanksgiving prayers over water (and have welcomed classes from a couple of local primary schools doing work on the sacrament of baptism); and we turned from our celebrations of Christ's incarnation towards the coming days of his cross and passion with the 'hinge' liturgy of **Candlemas** (with reflections on T.S. Eliot's bitter-sweet poem *A Song for Simeon*). In the **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity** Jan talked about her father's background as a Polish Lutheran, and the summary of our common journey produced by Polish Christians - serving, waiting, suffering, struggling, peacemaking, loving, feeding and uniting.

January also saw the **re-dedication of St Paul's School** by the Bishop of Stepney, who like the other invited guests enjoyed being shown around the school by confident and enthusiastic children. He chose two prayers for the school written by the children (which will be combined and used regularly), heard the results of a poetry day, and offered this prayer of blessing:

God of past, present & future

*In your presence in our world you offer us the wild hope, against all the odds, of human flourishing.
Thank you for this school, for its presence and engagement in its community, for its people & its purpose.
Thank you for all who have worked so hard to make the refurbishment of this school possible.*

*We give thanks for the community that has inspired it,
for the architect's eye that conceived it,
the designer's hand that developed it,
the craftsman's skill that brought it to birth,
the manager's experience that has overseen it
and for every gift, freely offered, that has given it life.*

*And now we ask you to bless this building as a place of
welcome & hospitality
education and development
creativity & imagination
meeting & encounter
justice & human dignity
fun & laughter.*

*In this place may individuals be cherished and communities renewed;
may young people be valued and foundations for living be laid carefully and well.*

*So may God bless, consecrate and make holy all that happens here
† In the name of the Creator, Redeemer & Sustainer of us all.*

I now declare this building blessed, rededicated, and fully open for business!



More pictures, and detail - including the plaque in the entrance, which also mentions Edith Wyeth's contribution to the life of the school over many years - at <http://www.stgite.org.uk/media/stpaulsschool.html#rededication>

The concert 'Peace Sings' on 20 January, in aid of the charity *International Alert*, by **The Brown Derbies** was great fun! They are an energetic and talented *a cappella* choir of students from Brown University, Rhode Island, who had the hats to match their title, and choreography to match their repertoire. After a high-octane performance, they left swiftly to catch a night bus to France for their next engagement!

Harold Alexander Allwood (Willer) RIP

Anne's husband Harry died on 31 January, aged 93, after a long period of illness at home, when Anne cared devotedly for him, and several weeks in the new wards at the Royal London Hospital, fighting every setback with determination before finally slipping peacefully away, having taken leave of all the family. He came from Jamaica in the early 1960s, and took great pride in his life's work as a builder, recalling almost to the last his many projects. His funeral eucharist is at St George-in-the-East on Friday 10 February at 11am, followed by interment at the City of London Cemetery, and we expect many will gather to remember him. Our condolences to Anne, to their children Joe, Carole, Cecil and Althea, three grandchildren and one great-grandchild.