

NEWSLETTER FOR JUNE 2011

Ascension Day

*Though the cloud from sight received him, when the forty days were o'er,
shall our hearts forget his promise, 'I am with you evermore'?*

Following St Luke's chronology, we keep the 40th day of Easter as the celebration of Christ's ascension (for St John, his resurrection and ascension are not separate), with a Eucharist at 7.30pm. Gone are the days when Ascension Day had a holiday feel - we have too many other public holidays around this time of year for that! - but let us keep the feast joyfully. In the ten days that follow, up to Pentecost, we focus on the promise and the reality of the Holy Spirit animating the church today.

The Blitz: 70th anniversary

We kept the 70th anniversary of the blitzing of our church on 22 May, and at the service dedicated two service books and two offertory bags in memory of Lally Britton. In his address the Rector told the tale of how the parish coped in those years. Many of the congregation did not know the story, and some asked for a copy, so here it is...

We saw them coming over against the bright blue sky. A policeman said 'better get in'. Then the bombs began to drop - the words of Phil Piratin, the Communist councillor and later MP, describing the blitzing of this area 70 years ago. With the death of Lally Britton last August, and Edith two months ago, we have no-one who was a regular member of our congregation when this church was gutted in May 1941. But the Blitz in London has been very fully documented and commented on, and there is no shortage of photographs and other archive material, or of tv programmes, about those dark days.

Let me remind you of what happened here. When the Second World War began, clergy were in short supply, and local parishes had been grouped together. St John's Golding Street - one of our daughter-churches - was closed (though it had a vicar until 1943; when he went, the church was used as a store for items from bomb-damaged churches; it wasn't demolished until 1964, by which time it was in a terrible state). On 16 April 1941 Christ Church Watney Street - another of our daughter churches - and its vicarage were destroyed by a landmine. St George's was gutted the next month (most of the documents are a bit vague about the exact date). Only the shell of the Hawksmoor building was left. The heat was so intense that the bells melted and the metal ran down the stairs. The fact that anything survived - particularly the tower - is testimony to the solidity with which it had been built!

We have a visible reminder of that night on the pillar in the south aisle - the abstract watercolour by Peter Bedford, whom some of you met before his death in 1998. He was a member of the Pacifist Service Units and was on fire watch at the top of the tower the night the bomb fell. He became an architect, and took up painting as a retirement hobby. It was only when he and his wife visited the church the year before he died that he realised, in conversation with Gillean Craig, that the Blitz had provided the subconscious inspiration for a series of abstract paintings he had recently completed, of which this is one. It bears the inscription *How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings of peace* (Isaiah 52.7) and *Remember before God the horror and destruction of war / Pray and work for peace and reconciliation in our world*, together with a memorial plaque added after his death.

Back to May 1941, and enter Fr Groser to take charge of the situation, and to exercise a heroic ministry through those grim days and beyond. St John Beverley Groser was the most famous of our 20th-century incumbents ('Beverley', by the way, was the name of his birthplace, a remote cattle station in Western Australia where his father was a missionary). An ardent Christian socialist and a thorn in the flesh of the establishment, he had been considered unemployable (the

Bishop of London said he didn't understand him at all, but recognised him as a gentleman). That's how he came to be put in charge of Christ Church Watney Street in 1929, since a commission had reasoned that he could do no harm in such a run-down parish. In fact he revitalised it during the 1930s, and put it back on the map as a centre of radical Christian thought and action. He had galvanised local opposition to Mosley, founded the Stepney Tenants Defence League (together with Jewish activists), spoken out against Chamberlain's policy of appeasement (one of the few clergy to do so), and notoriously in 1940 had broken into a government food store to distribute rations to those who had been made homeless, organising buses to get them to places of safety.

When his church and vicarage were destroyed Fr Groser and his family, and other clergy, moved into the Rectory (together with miscellaneous livestock, which nibbled the carpets). At first services were held in the Rectory, in the large room on the first floor (Edith remembered what a squeeze it was); the following year they moved into the Mission House when it had been made habitable again. The crypt was used as an air-raid shelter (by faculty, of course). In December 1943 a prefab within the shell of the church, known as 'St George-in-the-Ruins', became the parish's home for the next seventeen years. A leaflet distributed round the parish after the war explains the pastoral re-organisation of the parish, and the pattern of worship in what it optimistically described as the *charming little temporary church now built inside the roofless walls of the old church*. It looks anything but charming from the pictures, but it is remembered with affection.

Fr Groser went on to become something of a pillar of the establishment: he was Rural Dean, much in demand as a speaker and a member of various national committees and commissions (inc *Towards the Conversion of England*) and then Master of the Royal Foundation of St Katharine's (where Olive worked with him). He also became a minor film star, appearing as Thomas Beckett in a version of T.S. Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* (rarely screened, mainly because it was over three hours long). He entered enthusiastically into this experience, letting his hair grow long rather than wearing a wig. His hair had turned white long before, as a chaplain on the front in the first world war.

His former curate Fr Jack Boggis succeeded him as Rector here, and in due course, in Fr Solomon's time, the new church was planned and built - with a subtle reminder of the Blitz in the two worn stones either side of the apse. Schoolchildren on visits (we had an excellent year 2 group from Marion Richardson school on Friday) always notice these, and ask what they are. They're a good talking point, and one of the many noteworthy features of Arthur Bailey's new church.

Well, how does this chunk of parish history relate to the gospel message of Eastertide? It is clearly a story of death and resurrection, of the indomitable spirit of the church in adversity, spurred on by the hope of reconstruction. After its long period 'in the ruins', the new church was raised up and parish life re-developed. Since then, we have had our ups and downs, with various schemes for pastoral re-organisation in the area coming and going: and still we are here. But it would be a great mistake to believe that the resurrection of this church only came about in 1964. Even in the darkest days of the war, when we had no permanent church, even in the pre-fab days when our home was temporary, we were a resurrection community. The congregation, under the inspired leadership of Fr Groser and others, had learnt from experience the truth of today's NT reading, that the church is built of living stones, of those who work together to establish the kingdom of God, those who, as Peter Bedford's painting says, *pray and work for peace and reconciliation in our world*. It was a period when the Christian faith came alive for many, as it sought to offer practical service to those who were the victims of war and deprivation in our area.

For, of course, it was not just this church that was blitzed. So much of the surrounding area was flattened, so many lives were lost, so many homes and communities shattered. It was therefore appropriate that, as our website says, *the church shared in the suffering of the people of London, and is honoured to bear its scars to the present day*. That is surely better than seeking, as some have

proposed, to ignore our history and attempt to re-create Hawksmoor's church (which would be an artificial and speculative exercise, of no value to us as a congregation - even if someone offered us £15m to do it).

In a few weeks' time, on Ascension Day, we will recall how the risen, ascended and glorified Christ carries the marks of the nails and the crown of thorns into heaven: *those dear tokens of his passion still his dazzling body bears*. This is crucial, for suffering is redeemed, not just airbrushed away. As it was for the stones of our church building, so it must be for us who are called to be living stones. As St Paul wrote to the Galatians *I carry the marks of Jesus branded on my body*. We too must be marked as Christ's people.

Parish Officers 2011

At the Parochial Church Council meeting on 17 May we appointed the following officers to serve for the coming year:

- *Vice-Chair of PCC*: Michael Page
- *Secretary*: Susan Crocker
- *Treasurer*: Richard Powell
- *Gift Aid Secretary*: Toni Davey
- *Electoral Roll Officer (non-PCC member)*: Wendy Ramanoop
- *Churches Together representative*: Alex Nelson
- *Standing Committee*: Rector, Wardens, Treasurer, Secretary, Kim Ali

Deanery news

Women bishops legislation: At the last meeting of the outgoing Deanery Synod on 12 May we voted on the draft legislation currently before General Synod to enable women to be consecrated as bishops: not the principle itself (that was agreed some years ago), but the chosen 'package' to enable this to happen. Under an enforceable code of practice (yet to be finalised) parishes who believe they cannot accept the authority or sacramental ministry of a woman bishop - or of a bishop who participates in the ordination or consecration of women - will be entitled to request their bishop to make alternative provision; this will replace the current regime of 'resolutions A, B and C'. The issue is whether authority delegated by the diocesan bishop, rather than being separately provided by legislation, is sufficient to satisfy their needs.

Some speakers, both catholic and evangelical, believed it is not, and that their position will be compromised. They regretted that the archbishops' compromise plan for 'co-ordinate' jurisdiction had been rejected by General Synod. (Philippa Boardman, a member of General Synod, explained why they had acted not lightly or hastily, but regretfully, in doing this - it was a variant of the options that had already been considered and rejected.) Other speakers supported the proposals as the only acceptable (if not ideal) way to balance the principle of non-discrimination against the needs of those with conscientious difficulties; to go any further would create two classes of bishop. The debate was sharp but courteous, and the vote was in favour, though not by an overwhelming majority. Every deanery is required to vote on this, to guide their diocesan synods, a majority of which must approve the legislation if it is to go forward.

Your Rector's own take is this: one of the Church of England Canons (A4) says that those who are *made, ordained, or consecrated bishops, priests or deacons, according to the ... Ordinal, are lawfully made, ordained and consecrated, and ought to be accounted, both by themselves and others, to be truly bishops, priests, or deacons*. This was framed long before women bishops were in prospect, but establishes the principle that the authority of anyone duly ordained by the church must be recognized by all who regard themselves as Anglicans, even those who seek to distance themselves from the ministry of women. They need to acknowledge that the authority of every bishop - including 'men-only' bishops - ultimately comes from a church which does, in fact, ordain those of both sexes!

It was recently announced that **Rachel Treweek** is to be our next archdeacon (the Archdeacon of Hackney), and will start work together with our new area bishop in the autumn. Rachel is

already an experienced archdeacon (of Northolt - the Willesden area of our diocese) and was a curate in Islington deanery, and then Vicar of St James the Less, Bethnal Green, so will be able to 'hit the ground running'. Unfortunately she will not be living in one of the three deaneries that make up the Stepney area, but in the City, as her husband Guy has been appointed to the Guild church of St Andrew-by-the-Wardrobe (by Blackfriars); they will live there and she will continue to have a desk at the diocesan offices in Causton Street.

This means that the Archdeacon's Visitation on 31 May will be the last conducted by **Alan Green**, our area dean and acting 'archdeaconette'. Alan has held down three demanding jobs (for, of course, he has a parish to run as well) for longer than he expected, but without complaining - at least, not in public! - and we thank him for his shrewd and friendly support.

Andy Windross retires at the end of this month, as 'Area Director for Training and Development (Continuing Ministerial Education Officer, Director of Ordinands, Director of Post Ordination Training, Vocations Adviser)' - in other words, 'Mr Ministry' for the Stepney Area. A plain-speaking Yorkshireman, and great fun, Andy has juggled his many balls with great skill, and will be much-missed. He has often attended meetings at the Rectory here in connection with Reader (LLM) training. It is a pity that he is not being replaced immediately - apart from anything else, our area has over 40 ordination candidates in the pipeline who need looking after.

Within the deanery, the Revd **Peter McBride** has left the Poplar team to return to his former work as a solicitor, and **Trevor Critchlow** is to be the next Rector of St Dunstan Stepney, installed on 25 July, coming from a parish in Wembley. This makes your Rector feel his age, as 30 years ago he was Trevor's college chaplain in Lancaster. We look forward to welcoming him as a 'cluster member' in our quarter of the deanery.

Concerts

The second of the five concerts in the series by the intriguingly-named F-IRE Klang Codex, curated by Fred Thomas, will be on Saturday 4 June. Judging by their first concert, which wove together a mix of ancient and avant-garde music, this programme will be equally intriguing, and of a high standard. They are performing music by Sciarrino, Purcell, Kadialy and Kouyate's Sound Archive. Tickets are available on the door (£8, £5 concessions) and the performance begins at 8pm.

Coming events

You may have picked up a flyer for, or read about, the **1711 walk** on Pentecost Sunday - a celebration of the 300th anniversary of the 'Fifty New Churches Act' (of which we are one): in fact only twelve were completed, and they all ran over budget! Starting at 8am in Greenwich, a 15½ mile walk will take in all twelve churches, including ours, ending at Westminster at 17.11. The walk brochure is available in church, and it would be good to take part in this (it's all quite informal - billed as a 'baroque pop-up church crawl') as well as to welcome walkers here. Any proceeds from the day will go to a special fund within the National Churches Trust to help care for and maintain these churches. More details at <www.1711walk.org>

Bookings have now been made for the parish excursion to **Elstow Abbey** on Saturday 18 June, and we are looking forward to a day of discovery, tranquility and shared food and laughter; thanks to Susan, and her brother who is the incumbent there, for arranging this.

Tower Hamlets has arranged a series of public consultations in connection with the **Local Development Framework**. Three of these affect sites within our parish, but the best one to go to is probably Thursday 9 June at 6pm, at Turk's Head Community Café, 1 Green Bank, Wapping, where you can give your views on St George's Pools and Wellclose Square as well as on Goodman's Fields and the News International site. You can see the documents at <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/lgs/851-900/855_planning_consultation/consulting_on_the_ldf.aspx>

And finally: on Sunday 19 June we will be 're-launching' our **welcome table** - to stress how

important it is that we offer a warm welcome at the door on Sundays to regulars and visitors alike, and encourage all members of the congregation to play their part in this.