

The Parish of St George-in-the-East with St Paul

Newsletter for March 2014

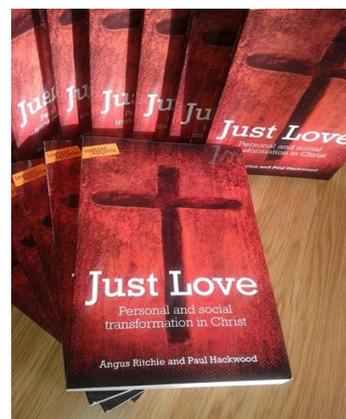


Lent

is upon us - later than for the last few years. I read a blog claiming that 'Lent' is a verb - untrue except as the past tense of 'lend', but the point was that it's a time for doing: making an extra commitment in terms of worship, prayer and bible study, and charitable giving or action. Or indeed for not doing: giving up something indulgent, whether food or activities. It's a time for God, for ourselves (helping us to focus on the priorities of life) and for others (including bringing us into solidarity with much of the world's population who do not have the choice to go without). In this it resembles Muslim Ramadan, but in contrast to the strict rules and corporate keeping of that fast, Christians are encouraged to make a serious-minded choice for themselves, and to keep their Lenten discipline discreet and not too public.

We start Lent in the somewhat unorthodox fashion that has been successful for the last couple of years: pancakes (and soup) not on Shrove Tuesday, but at 6.30pm on **Ash Wednesday**, immediately before the 7.30pm service, at which ashes will be imposed for those who wish - *remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return. Turn away from sin and be faithful to Christ.*

For our **Lent study**, we are encouraging everyone to use *Just Love*, produced by the Church Urban Fund and written by Angus Ritchie, of the Contextual Theology Centre at St Katharine's and the Venerable Paul Hackwood of Leicester Cathedral and chair of the CUF Trustees. Based on the Sunday gospel readings for Lent, it explores the controversial and challenging nature of the love that led Jesus to the cross. You can download each week's instalment [here](#), or printouts will be available at church. We will then aim to get together on a couple of occasions (weeknight or Sunday after church) to reflect on what we have read.



Bishops' Pastoral Guidance on Same-Sex Marriage

As well as fast-tracking the legislative programme to enable women bishops (to the huge relief of nearly everyone, including some who remain opposed in principle) General Synod debated a range of other matters, and gave a sympathetic reception to the Pilling Report which promotes 'facilitated discussions' to enable the voice of gay people, including clergy, to be heard in a supportive context. Unfortunately this process has been somewhat scuppered by the publication of the House of Bishop guidelines, which you can read [here](#):

A major difficulty for the bishops is the virulent and abhorrent anti-gay stance of large parts of the Anglican Communion in Africa and Asia. We want to stay in communion - but can we do so with those who Christians who back repressive homophobic legislation (including in some places the death penalty)?

As a result, the statement is perhaps more significant for what it does not say than for that it does say. For me, the biggest problem is that it sets up double standards for laity and clergy, which is anathema to Christian ethics. It recognises that lay Christians may properly enter into same-sex civil marriage, but seems to say that, because of the church's teaching on the nature of marriage, and the canons that determine clergy conduct, civil partnerships for ordinands and those already in ministry are acceptable, but civil same-sex marriage is not. (The legislation does not permit same-sex marriages to be solemnised in Church of England churches.)

I think this could only make sense if there was some clarity about the precise **difference between civil partnership and civil same-sex marriage**, but they say nothing on this issue. That's perhaps not surprising given the government's failure to say anything about it either. So long as civil partnership was limited to same-sex and marriage to opposite-sex there was a degree of clarity. But as I have repeatedly and boringly pointed out, all the debate was focused on 'getting married' rather than on 'being married' (or partnered). As a result, the government's continued reluctance to allow opposite-sex civil partnership now adds to, rather than reduces, the confusion.

A key question is, what would 'converting' a civil partnership to a civil marriage entail? What extra would be added, and what would need to be said and done so as not to undermine the reality of an existing civil partnership? (It's a bit like when we 'converted' deaconesses to deacons, though at least there it could be said that one was a lay and the other an ordained ministry - yet the liturgies were often identical.) Why is civil partnership OK for clergy but not civil marriage, given that (as the Bishops recognise) the state and the church's understanding of marriage will no longer be broadly the same? I could understand a ban on same-sex church marriage, as undermining church teaching and practice; but to ban those who have entered a lawful and 'doctrine-neutral' relationship - whether it's called marriage or civil partnership - seems perverse, as well as creating double standards. Quite what sanctions may be imposed remains to be seen...

In saying this I recognise that it will no longer be possible for me to argue, as I have always stoutly done, that the church teaches that 'marriage is marriage' wherever it is celebrated, and that civil marriage is not a different or lesser institution to marriage in church (which is an English oddity anyway) - again, it's 'being married' that counts, not the detail of the ceremony. But we are now moving into a situation where there are different doctrines or definitions of marriage.

The one point on which I (unlike many of my colleagues) agree with the bishops is that we should not provide services of 'blessing' after civil marriage, whether opposite- or same-sex, but rather offer appropriate prayers of thanksgiving and dedication in a pastoral context. This will be a hard line to hold, but if we remain faithful to what the *Common Worship* pastoral services already say, we can at least be consistent.

Michael

Visitation, Electoral roll revision and APCM

Coming weeks see the annual round of church business meetings. This year we start with a parish **Visitation** by Rachel Treweek, our Archdeacon, on 18 March - a useful health check to ensure that we have our documentation and policies and procedures in place, and a chance for her to meet the PCC and find out how they feel things are going. On Sunday **23 March** the parish electoral roll closes for its revision, after which no new names can be added before the Annual Meeting. (Last year's new roll is now updated annually.) If you are a member of St George-in-the-East but not on the electoral roll (and there are a few to whom this applies) be sure to complete a form before this date: you can download it [here](#). Being enrolled gives you rights as well as responsibilities! The revised roll will be displayed for checking from 6 April, prior to the Annual Meetings on **27 April** - more next month.

Other news in brief

- Space does not permit a report on Michael and Jan's **Turkey** trip - which included a male belly dancer as well as the wonders of Ephesus! Since then their second grandson has been born, in Manchester, and it was a delight to go and view **Woodrow** - 8lb 1oz, lots of hair and long fingers and toes.
- Consultations are taking place at St Paul's and St John's on Bethnal Green Schools on proposals that the two schools **federate** - they have been working closely together for the last year, and the governors back the plans.
- Those who remember **Ken Leech** may have seen a recent newsy letter from him. If not, the Rector has a copy.
- Speak to the Rector if you'd be interested in attending the **Stepney Area Vocations Day** on 30 March - a chance to explore a variety of lay and ordained ministries in the church.
- The **peregrine falcons** are again set up for breeding at the top of the tower. Last year they were the first pair in London to mate, and this year's season may be a bit earlier.