

Killingworth, St John

150th Anniversary

Well I hope that you have had a good year here at St John's. At least I hope that your 150 Celebrations have gone well. My guess is that by now you are all experts on the building and its quirky architecture. That the name Bassett Keeling means more to you than in part the name of a hunting dog. That you know all about 'rogue gothic architecture' with its bizarre (some would say) mix of styles, materials and colour. That most of all you are now well versed in what this short-lived style and one its most infamous architects bequeathed Killingworth Village. You already know I'm sure that you share this unusual heritage with churches in London such as those in Camden, Peckham and Kensington and Clerkenwall. Perhaps most notoriously was the amazing Strand Music Hall which was sadly demolished. Of course, his work was not universally appreciated – one commentator described the Music Hall 'his most extraordinary creation [] eclectic, debauched, eccentric, ugly, and outrageous'

Perhaps enough said at least for now! At the very least it gives you a church to treasure that is distinctive, unusual and very much yours!

But perhaps most of all it is important to call to mind that Bassett Keeling's church design is only a small part of what you have been celebrating throughout this year.

The old Sunday School adage should not be despised – ‘The real church is the people’. So I hope in your prayers and festivities you have given some thought and thanks to the countless people over the last 150 years who have shared in the Christian community here. There will of course be some names that everyone will recognise and some stories that will always be retold. For me I cannot come into this place without saying a thank you for the ministry of Michael Malleson and Tony Pattinson, you will have your own memories. But let’s also spare a thought for those long since forgotten, those who have always been under the radar, so to speak – those who dusted and cleaned, washed linen and arranged flowers, wrote minutes and organised fayres, delivered magazines and welcomed visitors, played the organ or sang in the choir, read lessons or led prayers, who counted the money and those who gave it. Those who came here to bring their children for baptism, with their lovers for marriage, or brought their dearest to bury. These are the folk who have made this building into a church, a house of worship and for who today we give thanks.

So as your celebratory year comes to an end and a new year with all its challenges and joys is about to begin what message can I bring you. As you would expect from me it is a simple word I offer. I want to call you back to basics, that it seems to me fits well at this time. As we remember the birth of the Christchild and how God concentrates hope in the fragility of a baby born to a peasant woman – how it all begins with a small

flickering light like a candle protesting against the darkness. And in your patronal festival, through the eyes of the beloved apostle, we see how the life of this child unfolded to show the immensity of God's love for his creation.

Two things strike me especially about the specific message your patronal saint offered.

Though scholars have loved to debate the true authorship, date and context of John's Gospel – without any firm conclusions I must admit, they all have been in awe of the poetic profundity of John's account. For me I note all too clearly that John's Gospel is made up of wonderful intimate vignettes of encounter. We follow Jesus as he meets people, converses with them and speaks to their deepest needs. People at the wedding, or the woman at the well, of the one caught in adultery. The Blind man and his family, the disciples' earliest encounters, the would-be disciples like Nicodemus who comes to see him at night.

This is a message that still rings true to me. To be Christian, someone once said is 'simply being friends with Jesus.' Such friendship must take into account the scholarly studies of the historical Jesus, the biblical criticism that takes account of the layers of redaction of the Gospel accounts and can at least glimpse the Christ behind the text but - and it is a very big but - to be Christian demands an emotional engagement or encounter with this Jesus, the Crucified, the Risen one, the Incarnate Son of the Living God. It was John's relationship as the 'one who Jesus loved' which is at the heart of his discipleship and apostleship and to suggest

to anyone that such an intimate relationship with Jesus is not the most vital element of their own encounter with God is to sell them short. So listen, my friend, to John, the ancient wise man who met the Christ while about his daily task - fishing - and in that human encounter was captured by love. That same Christ beckons you today, it is no philosophical tenet that speaks, no clever theory that demands you agree or understand it is a simple invitation to become his friend.

If the witness to a personal engagement is paramount then it must also be acknowledged that this is merely the beginning of what John has to teach us. While we cannot be sure of the date the Gospel was written - do we go with most scholars and look to the end of the first century or take the advice of John Robinson and agree that the text we have is the revision of a very early account written by the Apostle? - it matters little! Even a cursory glance reveals an account that is mesmerizing by its profundity. Each sentence is pregnant with insight into God's work among us. It is a poet that we listen to not a historian, or a writer of propaganda or an academic theologian. Even more it seems to me that this poet has plunged the mystical depths and drunk deeply. And at the end of the day his insight is majestically simple: God is love. No Pauline explanation is offered, a rather a simple dictate that this God whom John encountered at the lakeside, on the mountain top, in the midst of life struggles with beggars, children the needy and the sinful, in the garden at night and of course at Golgotha is love, love personified, undiluted, shockingly undiluted. This is revolutionary for not only does it reveal to us the very essence of God but it invites us to respond with that same self-giving love with which

we have been encountered. For in doing so we will find not simply each other but indeed our very selves. David Jenkins once confided in me that if he had the power he would force every church in his diocese to have a huge banner which they would unfurl at every gathering. It would simply say 'See how these Christians love each other!' Imagine the PCC meeting under that banner, or the Christmas Fayre Committee, or at the coffee counter after Sunday Service?

So, in this the final lap of your celebrations I want to call you to become more like your patron John –

- To put all your efforts in to developing and enjoying straightforward kindly and meaningful relationships with God yes; and also with each other for the KOG is built on such as this.
- To never forget that everything we Christians know can be simply put as God is love and therefore we too must learn to love scandalously, abundantly, wantonly in his name. Why? Simply because he first loved us

This will be real evangelism in action. Finally a prayer for the new year by Mimi Farrow

'Give us faces of stone

To set against the drift,

To set against the swift, strong, headlong

Current swollen to a torrent

That is sweeping our world away.....

To burn against the cold,

To burn against the old, the mortal chill

The quenching thrill of the fast-flooding tide.

Thou art Fire and light

(Give us hearts of flame!)

Make us to burn like beacons

In defiance of ancient Night.

Make us braziers in the cold streets of the cities,

make us lamps in Thy sanctuaries,

Make us candles to the Sacred Heart.

The world is lost and is looking for a way.