

## ***April 2019 Chaplain's Report***

### ***Revd John and Mrs Rita Bennett***

This has been our third visit to Taormina and the chaplaincy there. It has been great meeting up with friends and colleagues and also new people coming into Taormina. Our first Sunday, 7th April was a special birthday for me, as well as Passion Sunday. On the Tuesday following, we had a visit from Pastor Gauss, the former Lutheran pastor, with sixty eight people, holding a service in the church, to which our own congregation attended. He had begun the Lutheran cause in Catania, when he was a young man. The group he brought were taking a retreat around Sicily. They concluded their retreat by coming to us at St George's. We provided refreshments for them and enjoyed meeting their people from Stuttgart. I also brought them copies of a report/interviews I had done and had published on the Lutheran Mustard Seed Project for refugees in Catania, which I have considerable respect for. The Lutheran Church supports a number of refugees, in the excellent accommodation they provide there.

Palm Sunday attendance was good and our hard working verger, Salvatore, and his wife Mimma managed to retrieve enough Palm branches, from the next door garden, to decorate the church. Unfortunately three palm trees in the church garden have died during the year, due to an infestation of red palm weevil beetles. Throughout Sicily and up to the north of Italy, thousands of palm trees have been attacked by these invasive beetles, who have travelled here to us, via Egypt and the African coast. They gnaw at the tree trunks, sapping life from the trees. Only the Washington palm from Mexico escapes their fury. However Salvatore and Mimmi were not defeated.

Sad news came on Wednesday. One of our two serving church wardens, Sarah Jeanette Teed died of a heart attack in her home, between Tuesday evening and Wednesday

morning 16/17th April. The previous evening, Monday, we had spent at the Franciscan convent with Sister Tarcisia. We had been invited to the annual Seder meal again, along with the Franciscan friar from Messina.

There were over 50 people present. Norma had very kindly translated the proceedings from Italian for me. We had our words written down and she translated into Italian what I needed to reply. Whilst Rita and I are into our second year of Italian classes at Otley College back home, speaking Italian for public speaking is still a bit daunting, but we are pleased to be able to understand more and contribute a small amount, with mistakes of course. The hospitality at the convent was much appreciated again this year.

We trust the sisters' witness will continue at the site in Taormina, once their school building has been sold. We need their ecumenical awareness and witness, so we can all work alongside one another as we do here.

Sarah, one of our Church Wardens, passing on was very sudden and a deep shock to people here. She had been with us on Palm Sunday, and just said she was feeling cold. When they heard the news, Stephanie and Michael, her children, and David, Julian and Robert, her brothers, flew to Sicily from the UK. We held a commemoration service for her on Easter Saturday at 3pm.

Colleagues from Avutss, the charity for the needy she supported, and colleagues from the hospital where she visited patients, attended and spoke of her, along with our church secretary, the Lutheran pastor, friends and close companions. Bishop Robert and Bishop David, along with our Acting Archdeacon, sent messages of condolence. The church had cancelled its regular film show that week. Eighty two people attended Sarah's service.

A new church warden will be appointed at the AGM in May, but at present there is simply shock.

On Good Friday, we held our Stations of the Cross service, and later in the day we attended the Taormina town's Good Friday procession. At the beginning of our Stations of the Cross devotions I was able to explain its Franciscan origins, which began with William Way in the 15th century and when Innocent 11th granted Franciscans the right to erect stations in their churches, which in 1731 was extended as a right to all churches.

On Sunday 21st April, the Easter Sunday service was a joint Anglican/Lutheran service in Italian, German and English. Pastor Jutta Sperber, from the Lutheran Church and I led the service and the April 2019 Chaplin's Report Gospel was read both in German and in English.

The creed was said in everyone's native language and amazingly we all finished at the same time! Jutta and I both preached for 5 minutes, Jutta in German and myself in English.

The commander for German NATO forces and his wife were present and emailed us to say how much they had enjoyed the Holy Easter Anglican Mass. A 'unique experience' they described it as, being both in Italian, German and English. They have spoken with our church secretary saying that the German soldiers at the NATO base will be growing to 135 military personnel, representing Army, Navy and Air Force. They are to be present over the next 30 years according to present plans. Asmus Wolfgang, the Commander, will be their Wing Commander for Operations until 2022, and would like to have a close, friendly relationship with the Anglican congregation at St George's, building on the experience of this Easter morning, when he much appreciated the friendliness of everyone. They expect a German Lutheran pastor to be in place, as a permanent post, in the summer of 2019, with whom we can maintain contact.

The bible study on Wednesday, 24th April was held on the theme of the walk to Emmaus in Luke 24. 13-35. It was a suitable theme for Easter and also in the circumstances of our

loss of Sarah. We looked at times when we failed to recognise someone, the scriptural background to Messianic texts, the equivalent references in Mark 16. 12-13 and in Acts 8. 26-40, comments from Gregory the Great and why the two disciples returned to Jerusalem after the Supper at Emmaus.

Our last Sunday for this visit was on Sunday 28th April. Our congregations have been good throughout, with visitors attending from Dublin, the US, Germany and even Todmorden in the UK. We look forward to returning to this special Christian fellowship in 2020. With warm good wishes,

**John and Rita Bennett**

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