

DEDICATION & HOMECOMING 19 Nov 2017 Sermon by Canon John Halkes

November is the month of memory. All Saints on 1st November, then all Souls is on the second. This is followed by Remembrance Sunday on the second Sunday and here we follow on the third Sunday of November with remembrances of our patron saint St Winnow'.

Our first lesson today describes the attitude of worshippers at Solomon's temple in the words of the writer of the first book of Kings ch 8 verses 28-30

*Have regard to your servant's prayer and his plea, O'Lord my God,
heeding the cry and the prayer that your servant prays to you today;
that your eyes may be open night and day towards this house,
the place of which you said, "my name shall be there",
that you may heed the prayer that your servant prays towards this place.
Hear the plea of your servant and your people when they prayed towards this place;
O' hear in heaven your dwelling place;
heed and forgive.*

The text might well stand for us today some 3000 years on. Place and worship matter. And this church is dedicated to this special place where the human servant, St Winnow, a Celtic holy man who was close to God, said his prayers. We know little about St Winnow in reality, though pious legend speaks of his holiness and humility. Through human dialogue over about 1200 years, that is 700 years before the Reformation and the 500 years since, this place has allowed God to speak to his people - even when we have been empty of love, barren of spirit, frail of faith and surrounded by doctrinal turmoil. This is where our forbears came and where we come today to have a conversation with Him, the Other, the Ground of our Being. Today, our pursuit of holiness still seems to be aided by continuity of prayer in a place set aside from the ordinary.

The place set aside is home to our longings and desires. A home where God heeds us and forgives. We all need a home; it is a basic human need. But whilst we need a physical home, a place of shelter, comfort and connectedness with family- so too do we need a spiritual home; somewhere where we can feel connected to God's Holy Spirit.

Yes - A place for great occasions; baptisms, weddings, funerals, and a place

where we can share a humble meal of bread and wine Sunday by Sunday, but also a place of sanctuary where we can come quietly at any time to sense God's love and forgiveness in its eloquent silence. One of the congregation spoke to me before the service today. This was the place that shaped his Christian development as a boy and young man. In maturity it was the place he returned to when his faith needed refreshment. He came home.

So this is where we find a building dedicated to God and where God re-dedicating us. Each and every one held in in Godly conversation - and, on occasion, Godly conversion. It was prayer and conversation that drove the PCC to invoke the Holy Spirit two years ago and ask God and his people in this place to re-new the tower and provide a ring of 10 new bells.

This I submit, was not for the joy of bellringing, or for the very comforting sound of church bells, which George Frederick Handel called the English national instrument, it was not just because it might bring more young people and old ones for that matter into church (which it has done.) No it was motivated by an underlying desire to give God a voice here so that the conversations held inside the building might be carried beyond its walls - across the river and over the surrounding countryside. This meant having a strong tower - another biblical image - and the best sound we could provide.

On 6 August this year after a year of planning followed by a year of appeal and fundraising - the tower and bells were dedicated and baptised by Bishop Chris. On 28th August they rang out for the first time, then again later in late summer fruitfulness at Harvest Thanksgiving . They rang movingly on Armistice day when the first full peal was attempted. Today we give thanks once again. Also, today we rejoice that the old bells are not left to sulk at the imposters below them. Now they too can be safely heard without damaging the fabric of the tower. And we thank Lynn and Tony here with us today and their family for the gift of the new chiming mechanism.

I just want to add another thank you: bells don't sound by themselves they need ringers. Ronald Blythe, the Anglican rural writer and preacher, who described England as the divine landscape because a traveller is always within an ecclesial parish and within sight or sound of a church, wrote about ringers:

“the ringers are utterly absorbed... conditions of existence are temporarily cancelled and the Self revels on noise, logic, arithmetic and a kind of intoxicating joy which accompanies the striking of one's own particular bell in the deafening harmony”

(he went on to muse that ringers must reach stages of exultation on a par with that of cannabis, but he said there was no outward evidence to prove it!)

Then there is something else which Blythe observes, and I too can vouch for it.

“Ringing he writes, is an addiction from which few escape once they have entered into the small fortress like room beneath the bells, where the ropes leap into life against the palm of the hand like an animal.”

And like all ancient bells our bells are named individually either in memory of past saints of our parish who lie in our churchyard, or people associated with this holy settlement. Some are thanksgivings for God’s providence, some are thanks for Godly friendship and holy people. One marks a great ocean with families on either side. One marks a battle for the nation’s freedom in 1940 and a man who served in that battle. Thus all devices and desires of our people are brought together in harmony.

Ringers used to be famous for avoiding church services. In my old parish the pub in the valley below the church was called the Ring of Bells and it caused Vicars throughout the centuries enormous grief that this is where the ringers went directly after calling everyone else to pray. But here, I’m pleased to say, ringers attend worship; they see themselves as part of the divine music as much as our organist and our hymn singing. Their change ringing is as intricate as 17thC music and indeed Fabian Steadman was a man of the early renaissance and he started organised change ringing in 1668, though it might have been a few years earlier. Bach inherited the tradition of music, mathematics and logic. In change ringing everything must be brought together- time and evenness. Ringers travel miles to ring in other towers. They are social animals. They used to walk but now it’s cars and minibuses. We share ringers with our sister church at Braddoc; next year Exeter Cathedral ringers will come here and so will a band of ringers from Australia. Some walkabout!

Robert Palgrave a legendary Suffolk Tower Captain of the last century said this about ringers,

“you have to be bitten by the bug. You have to be smitten-- if you are a real ringer you think about bells morning, noon and night.” (I think we all here recognise in that description of Robert our own beloved tower captain!)

Palgrave also said, “that for those who understand bells, modern bells are best because they are scientifically tuned. Much of the old Bell making was a bit hit or miss”.

We rush to say that our sister tower of St Veep's bells were a hit straight away and they claimed a virgin or maiden peal. But after the service today we can interrogate Andrew the bell hanger for both towers, who is present with us, as to whether St Veep's old bells needed tuning when he took them down this summer for refurbishment!

So today our service is of thanksgiving to God for St Winnow, and that is why our Homecoming as his people is so joyful. It is also a day of thanksgiving for generous friends, for bells, tower and Gods holy callers to worship whose striking reminds us all of God's love and constancy.

Alleluia for the people loved and forgiven;

Alleluia for our ringers and our new bells;

Alleluia for the love of Christ with whom we now share the great Thanksgiving Feast;

Alleluia for St Winnow –

(incidentally my computer spell-checker programme insists on changing it to St Winner. And I'll settle for that!)

Amen