

St Peter's, Ealing
Sunday 7th July 2019
Trinity 3

The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few.

On Thursday afternoon, under that baking sun I found my self dressed in a hard hat and industrial safety boots, wearing a hi-vis jacket stood next to the Bishop of Willesden. We did feel a bit silly but apparently it was necessary to bless a steel beam. I bet that's the sort of thing you find yourselves doing daily; for me it was a pretty unusual occurrence.

Whilst waiting to present ourselves in such a way I got chatting to the photographer who had been engaged for the occasion (more of which later). Here was a chap I guess in his early forties who was somewhat bemused by the combination of clergy titles he was presented with. In fairness he was somewhat surprised there were clergy there at all. What has the church got to do with this building? I had to explain that one of the titles was the chaplain, the second was the Bishop of Willesden ("was there one?" he replied) and the other was me and in my books that wasn't a surfeit of clergy at all. 'What's the difference between a Revd and a Rt Revd then?' came the reply and then I found myself, in the midst of a portacabin office explaining the structures of the Church of England, something I had done only that morning to a church full of Yr1 pupils from Montpelier Primary. I suppose I was surprised that someone only a decade or so younger than me had no concept of the church; have we become so peripheral to the general life of society in such a short time?

Anyway, to the occasion. We were blessing the steel framework to the teaching block of Ada Lovelace School, presently under construction on the old Barclays playing fields site. As it is a building site, and an impressively big building site too, we had to don safety gear. Bishop Pete blessed a beam as a symbolic statement in the progress of the new school and the Churches commitment to the project. I was there both as a governor to the school and the Vicar of the parish, the Chaplain of course was David Brammer.

Whilst engaged in this slightly surreal afternoon event, I was left wondering about the Christian witness in the community. Afterall having a school with an overtly Christian ethos in the community must somehow bear witness to the place of God in that community. As indeed should the place of a parish church. One of the arguments for Christian Schools is the witness to the love of God through the education and nurture of young people. Not their indoctrination, that is something different. With the schools life and action being influenced by an understanding of the God's love in the world, witnessed to by the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, so it works itself out in pastoral care and the quality of education provided; that the educators are encouraged to strive for excellence, not for their own portfolio but for the good and well being of their pupils. Here then they encourage each

student to strive to achieve their best, whatever that best may be; whether it be an Oxbridge entrance or a good GCSE. As long as the student did their best, that was to be celebrated.

My thoughts then wandered to the wider context of the Christian mission and ministry for the 21st century. This is the season of ordinations, as I am sure you are well aware, and you will know developing vocations has been part of my ministry for some years; especially this year as I lead the ordination retreat and preached at the ordination of priests. How then does the church speak into a society that no longer understands the church or speaks its language? We have taken for granted for years that the church has a place in the world, yet the world has shifted and we haven't. How are we to respond and remain true to our understanding of God in the world whilst making the gospel message move with the present day?

Of course, this is the same question that Jesus' disciples were confronted with in many ways. They were being asked to go out and speak to a society that did not necessarily understand what they were trying to say? They were told to preach the "Kingdom of God has come near to you" and in doing so they were to rely on the generosity and good hospitality of those to whom they went to preach. Yet this was a society that may not have been ready for such a new message, for the response to 'How do you know the Kingdom of God has come near?' has to be, 'Because the Messiah has shown me and has told me to come and tell you.' No clever explanation or proof. Just a statement of faith; this is what I know in Jesus of Nazareth.

So here we are today. A church school going up in the parish. A church community gathering Sunday by Sunday to worship. A Bishop signing a steel beam. How are we to proclaim the word of the Lord through these events? We have a Mission Action Plan, drawn up by the Mission Team using material from a PCC training day and agreed by a PCC meeting. But it is nothing if not owned by the parish and acted upon by us all. We are after all the labourers. Bishop Pete's presence was a witness to the place of the church in the midst of the community. The Church school will hold up the Christian ethos and Christian principles of faith in the face of a secular world. We as the parish church with resources and many talents are called to share in the harvest in whatever way we can. Maybe not haranguing the populace on street corners or knocking on doors (although I have done that, it is an amazing thing to do) but we must find ways to engage ourselves and the community with the message of Jesus. It is our baptismal calling to share the good news of Jesus and to let the people know the Kingdom of God has come near. Pray for the mission of the church here and the outworking of our Mission Action Plan in this parish where the labourers are few, but the harvest is great.