

Dedication Festival 2005

Almost exactly one year ago, we celebrated our Dedication Festival very shortly after I had been appointed as Priest-in-Charge, and I preached a sermon about our common calling, our calling to be a church which looked out from its own centre, which is Christ himself, out towards all who surround and approach the position in which we find ourselves. It is a position which is both geographically anomalous - since we are a small city centre parish - and ideologically anomalous, since Christianity, especially in any remotely traditional form, seems stranger by the day to most of our society. At the time of that sermon, it would be another six months before I was actually licensed as your parish priest, and hence I do not have a year's worth of reflection to assess how well we are living up to that calling. That lack is a fortunate one, however. At the beginning of the academic year I have to give more time than usual to certain of my several other jobs, teaching Greek to theology students among them. One of the problems they often face is the translation of texts which they thought were familiar, but which they don't seem to be able to render in any recognisable form. In order to try a little empathy, I have been working on my own translation of a familiar New Testament text. Like my students, I struggled, and did not recognise the results of my efforts. But perhaps they are worth sharing anyway.

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love I am a sounding gong or a clanging cymbal. If I enjoy the beauty of holiness in the glories of Anglican Catholicism, but my building remains locked, that building is a Congregationalist chapel and not a parish church. If I listen to the music of Lassus and Palestrina, but close my ears to the gospel I am an aesthete and not a Christian. If I travel ten, twenty, thirty miles to reach the church at which I feel at home, but do not take my church and its prayer home with me, I am a spiritual tourist.

If I swing a thurible with all the precision of a guardsman drilling, but let that become my priority, it is not God that I am serving at this altar. If I pride myself on the fact that my church has a sophisticated theologically educated congregation with sermons full of history and Greek and philosophy and such like, but I do not give a helping hand to the undergraduates who think my church is highly bizarre, then my intellectual life is stuck fast. If I can fill my pews with visitors summer after summer, but have no organised system of welcome and greeting to all who arrive, then I am become a tourist attraction myself. If I take comfort in increasing numbers in an age of declining churches, but have no space for children then my church has no future. If I give myself weekly to God for two whole hours, throwing myself with enthusiasm into the liturgy, the singing, the preaching, the scriptures, but no

consequence of this flows over into the rest of my life, then I am deaf to the call of Christ

That call is patient, and persistent. It is not strident, or overbearing; it does not ask that which we are unable to give. It is gentle, insistent, wheedling; creeping beneath our defences and our securities, challenging our confidence in that which we have known and that which we are desperate to preserve. It is encouraging, and daring, pressing us softly but firmly to go the extra mile, to try the new thing, to open our hearts, our minds, our doors to all the radical love of God, to the self-sacrifice which roots our lives in the life of the Trinity itself.

You might disagree with my translation; many of you are far better classicists than I. But you will agree, I think, that, on this particular day, when we give thanks for all that our church has been and continues to be, we are also called to think long and hard about what it can and should be. **We** are called to think in this way. I do not say I; for now, perhaps more than at any time past, it is the people of St Mary Magdalen's who will make its future, and who will be striving to take it forward in pursuit of the Christ whom we call claim to follow. And there are simple things we can do, none more simple than making sure our church is adequately provided for – provided with financial resources, with volunteers to keep it open, with a prevailing sense of openness, of

welcome and community, which is essential if we are to continue to grow.

All of this, perhaps, we already know. I intend no criticism of anyone other than myself, and nor should any of us. Today, as in every Eucharist, we are giving thanks, and we have very much for which we should be thankful. But we also have things to do, things ahead of us, a future into which we must look with the cross in the centre of our vision, and with this question always ringing in our ears: what can I do in this place to bring Christ to the world?