Second Sunday of Easter, April 19, 2020

Over the last days we have lost three members of our extended church family (not to COVID-19 illness). I want to stop and remember them in love. Please pray for the repose of the souls of Beryl Sylvester, Jennifer Gibson and Ismay Charles. May they Rest in Peace. And Rise in Glory.

We pray for their families and all who mourn.

We pray too for the Revd Nancy Roth of Oberlin, Ohio. Mother Nancy was the first woman priest to preside at the Holy Eucharist in our parish church. Mother Nancy suffered a serious stroke last week. We pray too for her husband Bob, who has composed music we have used in our Divine Worship in recent years.

*For God alone my soul in silence waits;*

 *From him comes my salvation (Psalm 62.1)*

In these days in the Lady Chapel, behind the high altar, there is a trio of objects that trigger memories of generations past. In one corner of the chapel, the funeral pall is still resting on the back of the chapel chairs, waiting to be put away, following the recent funeral of Howard Bennett. In another corner are stored the lovely paintings of the monks of Whalley Abbey by Jennie Thomas, which were displayed at her funeral only a few months ago. Both Howard and Jennie served as Churchwarden in the 1980s. Presiding over the chapel is a statue of the Virgin and Child brought back from Flanders by Fr McAteer, so I refer to her as Our Lady of Bruges. I was licenced as parish priest at Holy Innocents on Fr Mac's last birthday, July 23, 2003, and officiated at his funeral a few weeks later. I imagine a conversation is happening amongst Fr Mac, Howard and Jennie about the state of things today, behind those Lady Chapel doors (they used to be the west end exterior doors). I imagine Reenie Hays, a past honourary treasurer of the church, interred in the north transept not far from our founding vicar Fr Eden, may also be in on the conversation. It would be a prayerful and laughter-filled gathering with these four, and I imagine it with delight. It is what we Christians do: WE GATHER.

Each week, on the first day of the week, we gather as a family. Some weeks everyone is present, other weeks people are missing. The purpose is to reassure and support one another in a shared meal; the purpose is to continue in the Way and The Breaking of the Bread; the purpose is to share the Peace; the purpose is to meet the Risen Christ; the purpose is to go back in to the world to serve and teach with the Grace of the gathering in our hearts.

Over the generations, the congregation of Holy Innocents have entered the building through different doors at different times and for different reasons. Clergy may have entered the vestry from Dalling Road, choristers and musicians their vestry room from Dorville Crescent; the general congregation too from Dorville Crescent but closer to Paddenswick Road and bridal parties through the main west end doors on Paddenswick Road (yes, the same doors which now we use to enter the Lady Chapel); there was a door on the south side of the building to get to the hut and the hall which has now become the porch we generally enter from – when we are allowed and we will be allowed again, to gather again. For now the doors are locked for fear of the virus.

But Christians do not only gather – we also Scatter and Disperse in a choreography of leaving and return. Some of you will have seen the wonderful images from the European Southern Observatory (ESO) in the Atacama desert in Chile of the star dancing around Sagittarius A\* (a proposed black hole) in a rosette-shaped orbit, perhaps proving Einstein's General Theory of Relativity even applies to a star 26 000 light years from the sun. No matter how far we are away from the point of gathering, we are still called by the love of God to dance in beautiful ways and to sing his praises until we return.

As I think of gatherings in difficult times, I often think of Fr Eden as he approached the end of his long tenure as vicar of Holy Innocents. He had built the ministry up family by family and the church building brick by brick – only after a generation to see all those Sunday School children massacred during the Great War in the fields of Flanders (Our Lady of Bruges pray for us). Over the 1920s various ministries stopped as society returned to civilian life yet remained shrouded in death – the Holiday Home at Shakespeare Cliff in Devon was sold; the nunnery at the top of Shaftesbury Road (now Ravenscourt Road) was let for residential use (the few nuns returned to the Mother House at Margaret Street it is presumed) and then this house too was finally sold; the liturgies which had been elaborate and grand diminished in scale and congregation. And with the Great Crash of 1929 the 1930s would continue to be challenging in the life of the church. Fr Eden retired in 1933 after 48 years of service. He died in 1934. Cressy House, the Clergy House, was sold. I can only imagine Fr Eden did not stay to celebrate 50 years as he was in poor health, but I do not know the facts. What we do know is his successor, Fr Pat Clay, who had been an assistant priest at Holy Innocents at the beginning of his ministry, would also die within a short time of becoming Vicar; in the economic sadness and uncertainty of the 1930s and with the guns of another war not far off in the distance. And I imagine the gatherings that must have taken place in those years to say good bye to the dead and to give hope to the living. When I stand at the altar, I look to Fr Eden's resting place, now wrongly under the feet of our choir and not at the altar of the St George Chapel as intended – this is to my right – and to my left I look to the Paice Cross and the chantry altar, a reminder of the real cost of war and the ultimate sacrifice of many.

Now, in these days, we cannot enter the church to gather in the Lady Chapel or around the High Altar. I speak of things you cannot now see.

We are outside, in our houses, in our rooms – yet we are still gathered in prayer. It's what Christians do. And I hope some of you are passing the church building some days in your cars, or on your walks – and stopping to look and see – and to see things you never saw before with eyes and hearts opened.

Our West End exterior is beautiful. There, in the Tympanum Arch, you will find *The Christ Story* by Trata Maria Drescher (1961), commissioned by Fr Mac in the early years of his ministry at Holy Innocents. Trata still lives in Barons Court, now in her 90s. I will say more about this mosaic another day. I hope we may invite Trata to return one day soon and celebrate the Diamond Jubilee of its creation.

It is what is on either side of the mosaic I ask you to notice as you are passing or in a photo on the web site. First is the tracery, (is that the right term? Or do I say voussure? Archivolt?) well, the stone work above the mosic, designed by James Brooks, our architect. It is the outline of a small modest house! Do you see it? It makes me think of Our Lady's home at Ephesus or the Holy House at the Shrine at Walsingham. *In my Father's house are many dwelling places, if it were not true, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you.*

Under the Mosaic, supporting the tympanum, is the trumeau or mullion – and here you will find the Virgin and Child (1935) by Samuel Ross Cameron. He would die in 1938 as the sounds of war grew louder still. Here, in 1935 with its first two vicars dead and a war looming the congregation placed their hope in the Lord and carried on building the Kingdom of God in this place. I had never looked at Samuel Ross Cameron's *Virgin and Child* with eyes so open as I have in these days.

So I ask you to stand there, at the railings, and look up with hope and bravery. I ask you to gather there with all the generations of saints and stand firm in your faith. I ask you to stand there rejoicing. *Do not doubt but believe.*

We may be in locked rooms but it does not stop the risen Christ from entering and saying, *Peace be with you*. We may feel fearful and shut out by not gathering, and yet we are gathered still, *Peace be with you*. And we have received the Great Commission. *As the Father has sent me, so I send you.*

We have seen the Risen Lord, *My Lord and my God!*

*I am grateful to have been loved. And to be loved now. And to be abe to love. Because that liberates. Love liberates. It doesn't just hold. It doesn't bind. Love Liberates. --- Dr Maya Angelou*