

College of St Barnabas Patronal Festival Evensong

Thursday June 9th 2011

Preacher: The Bishop of Southwark, The Rt Revd Christopher Chessun

Beloved in Christ, today we meet as God's holy people to share in the life of the College of St Barnabas; it is a particular joy to me to share in these Patronal celebrations today as the College Visitor and in the first months of my public ministry as Bishop of Southwark. In sharing with you today I want to give thanks for the many years in ministry and service that are represented in all of the residents both clergy and their spouses.

As we gather, together we can hear the call of the Lord, listen in the stillness and commit ourselves afresh to participate in the mission of God.

The College of St Barnabas is a source of blessing both for those who live here and to the wider church to which many of the residents offer their priestly ministry in local parishes giving support to the clergy in ways which are very fruitful.

The daily life of prayer within the community is a further blessing for those who are so much a part of it but also for the Diocese which is upheld and encouraged by the prayers offered each day. At the heart of the life of the Church is the constant offering of worship. And it is from our worship that everything else flows. For what we discover in worship, is that we are caught up in the vision of the heavenly kingdom on which the Book of Revelation offers us a wonderful perspective. We are caught up in the mystery of God, the mystery of his love poured out in Jesus Christ – in order that we too, like Samuel, might respond: 'Speak, for your servant is listening.' The one who calls is indeed faithful; but it is for us to listen attentively if we are to be well equipped for service and discipleship.

I want to offer my personal thanks to Fr Howard Such the Warden and to Lynn his wife (who has been in all our prayers in recent weeks), for their warm welcome to the College and to my new responsibilities as Bishop of Southwark.

It was good just before Holy Week to commission Bishop Alan Chesters as an Assistant Bishop in the Diocese and know he is already receiving requests across the Diocese. I express deep gratitude to +Mark Wood a resident of many years, also an Assistant Bishop. I continue to benefit from his wisdom and personal encouragement.

There are many signs of the Spirit at work in the Diocese that covers South London and East Surrey. The Diocese is growing: growing in faith and in knowledge of the Lord, growing in awareness of exciting signs of growth,

growing in numbers, growing in trust, growing in confidence, growing in mission. For this and so much more we are thankful to God who is the source of our confidence and our hope. This is founded upon the faith and witness of the Apostles and the life of the Community of Faith today.

We follow in the steps of the first disciples and like Saul in the reading from the Acts of the Apostles speak boldly in the name of Jesus. It is particularly important at a time when many want to predict, yet again, the terminal decline of the Church of England I want to say, come to the Diocese of Southwark! Come and see what is going on here. Barnabas recognised what Saul (who would become Paul) had to offer the new community of followers of Christ and we must continue to build on that vision that together they had for taking the Gospel to the peoples.

The Diocese of Southwark is served by some of the finest clergy in the Church. I see lives and ministry being poured out in sacrificial service and generous giving that says there is a better way to live. I see loving pastors about their God given tasks reminding us that the Gospels portray in Christ one who met people in the condition of their need and did not neglect the one to one encounter.

On my appointment as Bishop of Woolwich six years ago I sent out change of address cards including one to the formidable retired secretary of my old college where I read my first degree. By return post the reply came “You needn’t think you are the first (by that she meant old member): the last (Bishop Arthur Preston) died at sea in mysterious circumstances in 1936 after only three years as Bishop of Woolwich. Take better care of yourself!”.

Bishop Arthur Preston wrote *The Priest in his Parish* stressing the importance of the one to one encounter especially through pastoral visiting and I endorse his strong pastoral vision. The challenges that have faced the Church in every generation, especially in its early and formative years, have always been immense. We stand today on what is familiar ground, challenged by the need to reach the marginalised and to show solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. The need to speak for the voiceless, the need to stand up and speak words of justice and mercy to power and authority, the demand to proclaim a new vision for society and the world – these themes are constant refrains in the history of the Church. In this Diocese our brothers and sisters in our link Dioceses in Zimbabwe give an example of strong joyful hope in the face of continuing hardship and adversity. We have much to learn from them.

In the Chrism Eucharist on Maundy Thursday with large numbers of Diocesan Clergy in the Cathedral to renew their priestly vows I quoted Gregory the Great who sent Augustine to these shores and wrote the following, which has a strangely contemporary ring:

'It is vital that Christian leaders when occupied with exterior matters should not lessen their solicitude for the inner life, and by the same token, when occupied with their inner life should not relax their watch on exterior concerns. Otherwise, by being engrossed in the pressing duties that assail a leader, they will experience an interior collapse; or by being preoccupied with things that concern the inner life, they will end up neglecting their external duties to their neighbours.'

(The Treatise on Pastoral Care, Part 2, The Life of the Pastor, Chapter 7).

The challenges for the clergy have always been considerable. We are called to that place of exchange and encounter where ministry is demanding and costly. In retirement God is calling you to continue in your ministry of prayer and service. All the more need to tend to that inner life so there is a healthy balance with exterior concerns. And so I say to you, my beloved brothers and sisters in Christ as I said to the priests renewing their vows in the Cathedral on Maundy Thursday, take good care of yourselves. Draw from the wells of our great spiritual traditions and insights, Benedictine, Franciscan, Ignatian, and indeed more recent renewal movements, which with mutual encouragement and prayer, will help sustain that essential life enhancing balance. Let your light so shine all the more brightly by first seeking to be refreshed and renewed for service. And here in this College there is the great blessing of strong common purpose and common life.

It is given to us to continue to put our trust in the Lord, who is faithful to us. This deep sense of trust is wonderfully encapsulated by R S Thomas in *The Moon in Lleyn*:

'But a voice sounds in my ear: Why so fast, mortal? These very seas are baptised. The parish has a saint's name (likewise this College) time cannot unfrock. In cities that have outgrown their promise people are becoming pilgrims again, if not to this place then to the recreation of it in their own spirits. You must remain kneeling.'

And so, as we stand together, in these days before we celebrate the great feast of Pentecost, I ask that we let the Holy Spirit be the source of our renewal in confidence and trust.

Pray that The Lord may continually pour out his blessing on each of us. Ask that the Spirit may continue to anoint the whole Church to praise, proclaim and share the mystery of the love of Christ with a generous heart. For Christ is our great high Priest, in whom all our ministry and service is to be found.

Amen.