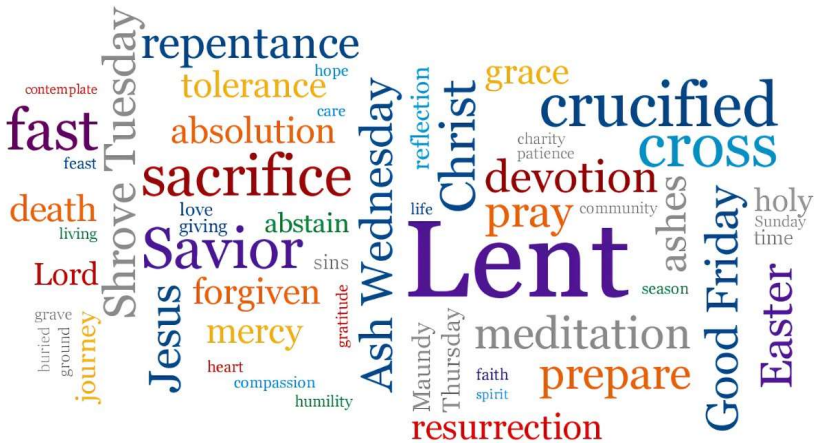


St Mary's News

March 2022



Includes

Lent is a Gift – the Revd Tony Rindl

Lent is a Journey – the Revd Joshua Brocklesby

Report back from the Away Day – Cath Da Costa

Book Review – Roger Courtney

.... and much more!

Lent is a Gift

I think in the light of current world events Lent offers an opportune time for us to assess our own lives in relation to all that is going on around us.



Perhaps provides the space to ask critical questions of ourselves as to what extent to we live the life God desires for us. Lent for me is a gift, an invitation, a time of reflection and prayer, to change what needs to be changed and to draw closer

to God. I think it is a mixture of yes and no: no to chocolate, no to alcohol, no to greed and corruption, no to lies, no to prejudice, no to war. At the same time: yes to acts of kindness, yes to prayer, yes to peace, yes to justice, yes to generosity, yes to God. We might not always agree with every yes and every no and indeed as unique individuals we will have our own lists of yeses and noes. Sometimes they need to be held in tension, and in that place of repentance there is a profound sense of saying yes to sorrow and remorse for all that we regret and at the same time to say yes to joy and anticipation as we consider God's abundant grace and goodness as we draw nearer to him in our journey through Lent and towards our Easter celebration.

As it stands there is war in Europe, and with it a disturbing comparison to events in 1939 that led to the outbreak of the Second World War. We have looked on in horror as Russian tanks roll into an independent sovereign state knowing that Ukraine is subject to relentless airstrikes and the full might of the Russian army causing untold damage and distress to countless thousands of people. We all recognise the cost and the time it takes to fully recover from the effects of war. What is destroyed in a matter of days will take months, years, even decades to rebuild and the human cost and trauma will perhaps never be removed completely. The international community has an unenviable task knowing it cannot sit back and allow this to happen but needs to act proportionately to prevent further escalation and draw other nations into this war.

One of my concerns over Brexit has been the weakening of the EU and the ability for Europe to defend itself from powerful despots such as Putin. Perhaps this is a timely reminder that despite political differences it is

important to maintain good diplomatic relations and to remain united in our fight against tyranny and injustice. I think the response has been measured and united. Economic sanctions seem to be having some impact and the supply of arms has contributed to the resistance that the Russian Army is experiencing, and suggests Putin is not having it all his own way.

Football and the sporting world in general have offered overwhelming support for Ukraine, and especially for teammates and colleagues from that nation. Where other sanctions may have only a limited effect, I am quite sure moving the Champions League cup final from St. Petersburg will have hit Putin hard both as a sports fan and as someone who was born in that city.

Equally impressive is the outcry on social media and an almost unanimous voice condemning the war and the actions of Putin and his government. Again, there has been much good will towards the Ukrainian people and their resolve to defend their country against such an outrageous act of aggression. Equally vocal has been the admiration for the Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky both in terms of brave defiance in the face of such aggression, but also the level of integrity and level-headedness in such an hour of great need.

We all need to be very careful to make sure our support for Ukraine doesn't become an anti-Russian crusade. It is clear there are many Russians who are very much opposed to this war and many having publicly condemned the war and Putin's actions, leave themselves vulnerable to imprisonment and other recriminations. I think it is reminiscent of the aftermath of 9/11 where many Muslims experienced a very unpleasant backlash. Just as Bin Laden is not representative of mainstream Islam, Putin is not representative of most decent Russian citizens. Culturally Russia has contributed much over the years: classical music, ballet, dance, architecture, literature all come to mind. It is a country that has produced at least 27 Nobel laureates. We must not allow our condemnation of Putin and his acts of aggression to boil over into anti-Russian sentiment just as we should resist Islamophobia in the light of terrorist activity. I don't know what the Russian for 'not in my name' is but I would imagine there are a lot of people saying that right now.



I commend to you the Lent course being offered this year through our Connect Groups and more details are to be found elsewhere in this magazine. St. Mary's is part of a worldwide church that embraces many different nations and cultures and contained within many different traditions and forms of worship. Much of which is familiar to us, but some is different. There is much that we might want to embrace and there is that which we would rather avoid. I hope the course will help us gain insight and understanding and help us appreciate all our sisters and brothers in Christ have to offer as we experience different approaches to worship. I trust the course will inform our understanding and recognition of others and can help us form deeper relationships with Christians of different traditions than our own and share with each other insights and treasures that will deepen our understanding of God's love as we seek unity and peace throughout the world.



The Revd Tony Rindl

Cardiff Street Art



A Prayer for Peace

For those who are
fleeing: sanctuary

For those who are
staying: safety

For those who are
fighting: peace

For those whose hearts
are breaking: comfort

For those who see no
future: hope



Lent is a Journey

Friends, Lent is journey. A journey which we can walk together as a church community as well as individually with Jesus. As many of you know we have a lent course on offer this year which is themed on the verse from Galatians *We are all one in Christ Jesus.*



We are living at a dark time. A time when difference is seen by many as a threat. A time when that fear and desire to control has even led to an invasion to put an end to it. A war to attempt to force one view or way of thinking on another whether they like it or not. If ever there was a time for us to look at how important it is to seek unity and understanding rather than division and fear it is now.

As Christians we are united by Jesus, a unity which should lead us not to seek division but unity. And so, as we journey, we need to draw closer, to seek to understand rather than simply reject.

During Lent we will gently explore this through worship. There are many different styles and ways we can worship, some with a different focus. Some of these ways may not be for us, we may have preferences, ways we like and dislike. And yet others might have different feelings, they may enjoy what we dislike. But all are worship to God. All are united in their purpose of being an act of worship.

Worship is centred on God, not on ourselves. And our worship through Jesus has no division. And so rather than reject ways because we don't like, we can at least experience them and seek to understand others and why they may like them through it but more importantly seek to learn more about God and the diverse way he creates us in the process.

As we seek to see God and understand God through the eyes of others as well as our own our field of vision of God increases. Our knowledge of our amazing God gets that bit deeper. And as we journey together each week, we remember that we are one not because of ourselves but because of Jesus. We remember that Jesus said of his death that *"when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all people to myself."*

Jesus unites us all, unites all our worship. Regardless of our own likes or dislikes, Jesus dies for us all on the cross. And he calls on us his followers to think not simply of ourselves but to think of others. To love our neighbour as ourself. To seek to understand and not simply reject. And so can I encourage you to journey with us this Lent as each week we have a service with a different focus within its worship. You can find some details below and more on the website. Why not join a Connect Group to join in the discussion too.

WEEK ONE - FOCUS ON VOICE

Service - Sunday 6th March - 5.30pm Choral Evensong

WEEK TWO - FOCUS ON EUCHARIST

Service - Sunday 13th March - 10.30am Sung Eucharist

WEEK THREE - FOCUS ON WORD

Service - Sunday 20th March - 10.30am Service of the Word

WEEK FOUR - FOCUS ON THEME

Service - Sunday 27th March - 10.30am Mothering Sunday Service

WEEK FIVE - FOCUS ON SIMPLICITY

Service - Sunday 3rd April - 5.30pm Taize Service

WEEK SIX - FOCUS ON EASTER

Service - Sunday 10th April - 10.30am Palm Sunday



God bless,

Josh

Report back from the Away Day

On Saturday, 26th February 2022 we held an Away Day at St Mary's. The day arose out of the need to create a new MAP (Mission Action Plan) at St Mary's, but was also a part of an ongoing conversation we have been having between ourselves and with God as to how do we see ourselves and what our purpose is? What do we feel God is calling us to do?



Our roots: What has God taught us so far?

Our first session of the day therefore was about looking at our roots and thinking about what God has taught us so far. As a part of the session, we looked at our journey and remembered:

- The previous away day 2019 where we reviewed our previous MAP - around Worship, Welcome, Witness and our work on Connect Groups, developing a dynamic leadership team and re-ordering of the church building
- Our use of the LYCIG (Leading Your Church Into Growth) material
- The meeting with Kate Peacock who came to St Mary's in 2019 to speak about Church Growth using material from Bob Jackson
- The session Bishop Michael ran in 2021 around ABCD (Asset Based Church Development) a strategy that encourages turning traditional churchmanship on its head. It espouses that, instead of trying to provide services we think are good, we celebrate what we have and use the resources already present, such as working in partnership with God and with other organisations and groups in our town; to change our approach from trying to get people to come and be like us to rather meeting people where they are and meeting with people in our Parishes in terms of OUR common needs or concerns.

- Josh’s research findings on the community around us – for example that 72.4% of the 7,711 people living in our Parish are under the age of 44 and of those just under a quarter are between 18 and 29.
- Finally, how the PCC and leadership team through prayer and discernment came up with the 3Ps: Parish, Profile, Partnership.

We started the session by looking at the challenges and hopes we are facing and have faced. The reason for this was three-fold:

- The MAP has to be the product of everyone at St Mary’s working together – to use an analogy, to sing together from the same hymn sheet.



We all have a lot of things we are passionate about; there are a lot of things that we on a personal level should be doing and which if we worked together could make a real impact – but what is God calling us as church - as the body of Christ - to do? A strong sentiment that came out the day was that for this process to work there has to be responsibility, accountability, honesty and trust.

- While Bishop Michael did specify that our first step should be about defining how we see ourselves and identifying what our purpose is, this has been a part of our own narrative over the past couple of years – for example I remember a very interesting conversation one Connect Together where we thought about what images best described St Mary’s such as lighthouses and harbours and how our overriding passion is to ensure we do not become a club but remain ‘true’ church – the active worshipping body of Christ which is loving enough to truly welcome all who come as they are, providing sanctuary to those who need it and willing to go out into the community to meet with people where they are
- To recognise that the past couple of years of the pandemic have been difficult – that the world we have re-emerged into from lockdown is different and that like the Hebrews returning from Exile, we are being called to help rebuild the community around us. For example, it is sad that so much time has passed since that previous away day back in 2019, but even arranging the one on Saturday was difficult

as we ran the gauntlet of potential new lockdowns, being socially responsible and managing people's fears.

Challenges people identified included: People moving away, need to build community, transition back to face, the transient nature of the population in Watford, discrepancy, finances, Zoom cultures working / worshipping from home, lack of volunteers as they remain online, How to we make our building work for us?, engaging with others with a transient / diverse community, integrating, anxieties and mental illness post pandemic.

Our hopes and joys: All challenges can be addressed, we have a vibrant community at St Mary's with a passion to meet the spiritual and other needs within our community, people willing to pray but also take action by stepping out in faith, our message of hope and joy, we have the building where we can offer sanctuary and safe space, Eschatological hope: Revealing the coming kingdom which is here but not yet, we do engage and connect to wider St. Mary's family, our evangelists, we do have an improved website and access to social media, we have a heart for social action.



Who are we as church? What is our purpose?

During our next session we drilled down a bit deeper into how we saw ourselves and what our purpose was.

First, we wrote down words and phrases that we felt described St Mary's and came up with:

Welcoming; people; potential to grow; Diverse (but could be more so); heart / love; community; sending out; servant heart; Good News; friendly people; friendly energy and willingness but unfocussed; choir and connect groups; ability; cold; a community that knows why it is there; a place of fellowship to worship with friends; family, fellowship, growth; smile; active; a diverse group of people where a few people do most of the work; uplifting; inclusive; people inside but what about those on the outside; alive; God at the centre.

We also looked at Dulles' Models of Church which highlighted the following phrases and words which people felt described St Mary's and what our purpose is:

- We need to be a church family rather than a family church. Church family allows and emphasises the role of all being in the family, rather than coming already as a family.
- We as a church have a foundation of over 2000 years.
- Duty of care for all not just those who perhaps appreciate it
- Doing our jobs can be act of worship, we can be refuelled and reenergised to do our roles through the week.
- St Mary's is a community related by Spirit nature of the church and as such we should be warm and welcoming – accepting of people for who they are. It was acknowledged that we could help people to develop a deeper sense of belonging.
- A worshipping community of believers who by their faith become a sign and instrument of the union of God and humanity
- A parish is a family – although it was also expressed that we need to take care of how we use the term 'family'
- That sometimes we lack structure which undermines our sense of purpose or direction
- As part of the Church of England, we have some sense of hierarchy in that we have a priest or vicar, a curate, ordinands (priests in training) and we have identified bishops, but it was also felt that under Jesus there was no hierarchy, and we should be working together.
- As a church we are a visible sign of the presence of Christ in the world and that we should become the visible way that Christ works in the world.
- There is a history of abuse within the Church of England which has made it difficult to engage with some outside the church
- We need to communicate what we do as individuals – both in terms of how we live out our faith in what we do the rest of the week outside of church on Sundays and in giving testimony as to how God has worked in and through us.
- As a church we are the messenger of the Gospel – the voice or announcer of the Kingdom of God.

- We say we are committed to Social Justice, but do we do anything about it or merely speak about it? We do need to remember that we live our faith through this action, but that it is our faith which we are living.
- At St Mary's, we see ourselves as a community of people who hope that in everything they do they imitate Jesus in word and action in how we live out Jesus's message of peace, justice, love and reconciliation in the world around us and that in these actions we are called to be personally and communally accountable.
- We understand that suffering may be a part of our lives and those in the community around us and we are called to meet people in these dark places as well as the light.
- God's saving love constantly calls each of us to renewal and reform.

What can we do about our planet?

Andy Roby then spoke to us about the heart that St Mary's has for the planet and in particular fighting climate change. There have been various sermons and conversations on this topic – especially following Andy's involvement with COP26 through his work and the hope is



that St Mary's can sign up as an Eco Church. In order for us to sign up for the first / Bronze award, an assessment was completed which highlighted four areas we need to do work to complete the requirements of this award: worship / teaching, buildings / land, outreach and encouragement and lifestyle. It was recognised that this subject was important in showing that we don't just preach but we do acts of love too and that it is one that is relevant to young adults and therefore a good one to use to engage with this age group.

How to be a horticulturist – growing a church

In the afternoon we turned our attention towards the MAP itself and planning a path forward. We started this session by acknowledging that a church needs to grow not just numerically but spiritually and through action

too. It was also recognised that growth requires clear, dedicated intervention and that we need to ensure that we embraced all five of the 'Five Marks of Mission':

1. Tell about Jesus
2. Teach the faith
3. Tend to Pastoral Care
4. Transform Communities
5. Treasure the Environment



To start off the discussion around the MAP itself, we looked at seven potential hurdles which might be sticking points within St Mary's: - to explore issues we felt new people had of 1. Discovering that the church exists, 2. Meeting church members, 3. Attending an initial service or event, 4. The initial welcome and friendliness, 5. Making new friends, 6. Joining small groups and belonging, 7. Making a contribution. The idea had been for a short, 20-minute activity to spark ideas on which we could hang our thoughts as we gathered ideas around the MAP, but we got bogged down on this task. While this did take from the MAP discussion time, the resulting conversation was very meaningful and important. Our aim with this MAP is to find compass points which will help us overcome issues we feel are present within St Mary's and to encourage growth.

Some of our biggest barriers were felt to be:

- Need to do better on what we are doing – website updating, services, social media
- Need to better notice new people who can feel invisible

- Better at explaining the service, the journey for people after they have come once.
- Making new friends – need to step out of our cliques, better incorporating people
- Better at belonging – small groups and know what groups to send people to or invite people to
- Communication – need to be better at telling people about our events and services. What to expect, what they are coming to.
- Better at resourcing and delegating.
- Too much on demands on groups... need clarity on what they are being called to do. Need to be honest about what the job involves...
- Barrier of dropping the details – need to now make sure things are done. Hold ourselves accountable.
- Some people want and need flexibility to how they help or volunteer
- Easier to do things with someone else

We then broke into three working groups, one for each of the MAP areas:



Parish / our context:

This area of the MAP looked at what is happening around us, what we are as a church and as a community. A better name for this might be ‘People’.

We discussed how we connect with different groups within our

surrounding community e.g. through ABCD linking church AND community better and engaging with young adults, young working people, youth, families, etc. We discussed ways in which we could find out what people outside the church are seeking or needing and what they have to offer. How do we position ourselves as St Mary’s in the heart of Watford and do things IN community by being more community facing but at the same time provide a centre where people can meet and just be!!

We discussed how the machinery of existing operations is OK and just tinkering to be able to spread the load better and raise co-leaders especially

as we face Josh and Cath leaving soon. We also discussed doing a skills audit of church to find hidden assets and to better learn how to manage them. We talked about how we could develop such things as the Ecochurch / climate change action and how we can foster a sense of authenticity and belonging amongst those who attend St Mary's.

One area that seems particularly relevant was how we could develop mentoring or discipleship at St Mary's both on a one-to-one basis and within connect groups. It was felt that discipleship was not only important in discipleship, but it may be a good way to help people engage in activities or tasks and develop required skills. A model of doing things WITH people not for them or co-leadership was discussed.

Profile / Communication

This area looks at how we communicate – this could be outwards to those outside of our church walls e.g. through the website and social media and takes into account how we are perceived by those around us. It also looks at how we communicate with those who come into our building whether these are impromptu engagements such as from visitors – for example how do we tell people who we are and what we are doing for example on our display board and signage. Ideas included for example having a volunteer area for the website and discussing whether our disability access needed work. It was also discussed how we communicate between ourselves, for example how do we let people know about and what to expect at upcoming events.

Partnership

(Taken from Marcus's notes): "Tony introduced the session (by saying that) St Mary's can't do everything by itself, not least because of restrictions on finance. But we can join with others in the community by way of partnership to build our Christian influence in the community. Several organisations were hiring St Mary's which brought the additional benefit of income. Partnership was about connecting with partners, making relationships and serving as outlined last autumn by Bishop Michael. Tony asked us:



- which organisations were in line with our thinking; and
- what steps did we need to take to create healthy partnerships?"

Partnership is when two or more come together to do a project or activity together. In such a scenario one partner can be stronger than another but the passion and commitment for the success of the project has to be equally matched otherwise it will not be a success. For example, in the partnership God is offering to us individually and as a church God will always be the stronger partner in terms of His authority, knowledge, talent and experience but if we do not wholly commit to it then it will not work – God is not going to take over and do everything for us.

St Mary's is already involved with a couple such partnerships already – for example, on Tuesday a new, monthly Language Café started at St Mary's which has come about because of St Mary's working in partnership with Watford and Three Rivers Refugee Partnership (WTRRP) and others within Watford. It is partnership because of the active participation of people from St Mary's, the befrienders from WTRRP and other individuals; it is partnership because there is sharing of financial, physical and other resources; it is partnership because all those present are passionate about and see the need for a safe space where those learning English and new to the UK can come to converse in English, gain some new vocabulary, make friends and get advice. It is partnership because someone from St Luke's heard about the café and brought others from there along with her. Another example of partnership is that a number of people from churches across Watford, including myself and one or two from St Mary's, give up their Thursday evenings to run a youth group for the Afghan Refugees because we were moved by the plight of these people, and we wanted to do something actively and directly to help. We need to be clear that partnership is not just hiring out our buildings to other organisations but actively engaging in projects and events together.

Planning the way forward

- Saturday's Away Day was never about one person telling everyone else what we are going to do in our MAP; the MAP was never going to be written in a day either. The MAP process should be an ongoing conversation – it should include everyone at St Mary's even if you were not able to make the day – it should be in the response you may have to what I have written above! Were you there and you

disagree with what I have written? Were you unable to be there but disagree with the ideas raised above? Tony proposed that the Away Day was just the first of many opportunities for people to discuss, discern and share ideas for the MAP and that further opportunities would be provided such as the Connect Together sessions during May and June. He also reminded us that the MAP needed to be broken up into three areas (since the 3Ps Parish, Profile and Partnership) with 4 or 5 action points under each and that the end of the process required the PCC to sign it off before sending it to the Bishop.

The development of our new MAP needs to be a process because when we write our MAP, we are all signing up to it – we should feel passionate and engaged with it. This does not mean that if you are already doing a lot at St Mary's and you feel you are at full capacity that you should take on more – this is about sitting down together and deciding what we want to do as a church. It is only once that this is done, that we can discern for ourselves where our talents, skills and experience draw us when we come to the implementation of the MAP. Having said that, our resources - including having enough people available to do things - are limited and a part of the process should be a conversation about prioritising where we use these resources - for example if we are struggling to find people on a Sunday morning to do coffee and welcome maybe we should drop the coffee and ensure there are enough people on hand to welcome people in?

The above is my account of what was discussed on Saturday, albeit drawing on comments and feedback given by others present. If some of these concepts and ideas were not explained clearly on the day or not enough time was given to discussions, then please get back to me. I would love to have that conversation.

Cath Da Costa



PCC Report – February

Meeting on 21st February – by Zoom

The following report briefly covers some of the matters considered at the meeting.

Finances The Council renewed its consideration of the expenditure and income forecasts for 2022 and discussed a paper on actions to increase income prepared by a small group of PCC members. While accepting that the forecasts were the best that could be made at present, the expected deficit, some £32000, was clearly not sustainable and the Finance Committee was remitted to prepare an Appeal and other measures for improving the position. Adjustments to designated funds, as required by the Independent Examiner, were agreed. These served to increase the General Fund reserve but did not in themselves alter the underlying imbalance between income and expenditure. It was noted that the Accounts for 2021 were ready for submission to the Examiner.

Watford Town Centre Chaplaincy The Council approved a Memorandum of Understanding setting out details of the relationship between St Mary's and the Chaplaincy and an associated letting agreement for the use of the room occupied by the Chaplaincy. These documents would help each set of trustees to fulfil their responsibilities.

Buildings Roger Courtney reported that two estimates for work in the bell chamber had been received and he was consulting the architect on them. A further application for a grant for replacing the floodlights had been submitted and he was seeking an estimate for the installation of children's toilets prior to seeking grant funding for this work, which the diocese had now approved. A faculty notice for the relocation of the New Hope memorial stone had been displayed and the faculty application would be made shortly.

Josh added that notices in the church and Church Centre were being reviewed, one early improvement being the new weekly schedule of activities

in the West Porch. The Council welcomed the extension of opening times for the church.

Mission Action Plan The Vicar urged all PCC members to attend the Away Day on 26th February.

Pre-School Alison Saunders reported on Pre-School staff changes and noted that the number of children had now risen and there was now a waiting list.

Vicar's report Tony commented upon the high standard of services being offered and expressed appreciation of all concerned including the choir. He particularly commended those who had contributed to the service that was based around the life of Archbishop Tutu. St Mary's had hosted a service for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and he had participated in other services during the Week. Also, he had met the Elected Mayor and representatives of the British Legion to discuss changes to Remembrance Day events in Watford.

Roger Courtney

May the knots
of this week
loosen

May the storms
of this week
pass

May the wrongs
of this week
wither

May the good done
take root
and last

Raymond Friel

Fairtrade – 27th February 2022



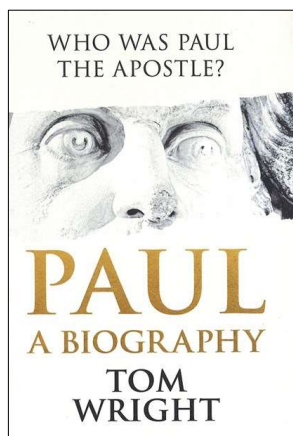
Fairtrade Champion Albert Tucker, who was instrumental in setting up some Fairtrade companies such as Café Direct, Divine Chocolate, OK Smoothies and Liberation Nuts, gave a most inspiring sermon outlining many of the benefits of the Fairtrade system for farmer producers and their co-operatives around the world. He talked about coffee beans as one of the most expensive raw materials. The regular guaranteed Fairtrade prices paid to farmers in Fairtrade co-operatives, enables them to access education and health-care for their children. Cocoa, tea and sugar are also very important Fairtrade products. Albert showed us some soft drinks called Karma Kola, available in Waitrose stores, which come in three flavours – cola, lemon and ginger. They contain Fairtrade cola and Fairtrade sugar. A Fairtrade premium is paid to the co-operatives on top of the fair prices paid to individual farmers. The premium is used to create infrastructure for the community. This may include a clean water supply, a storage facility for the harvest, so that the produce may be sold on later, when the world prices

recover again after the glut. Building a bridge over a local river and a good road enables easy access. A library and school text-books enhances a community's education and well-being. In remote areas building teachers' houses to attract competent teachers gives them status. A community motor-cycle ambulance and cycles for nurses to visit the clinic enables great improvements in health. Many of these facilities, which we take for granted in UK, provide major benefits for remote rural communities and can be afforded by membership of the Fairtrade system.



FAIRTRADE

Book Review: 'Paul – a Biography' by Tom Wright



Paul is the figure that towers over all others in the early years of Christianity. His life and his thinking come down to us through the accounts of his missionary journeys in the Acts of the Apostles and his letters to churches and individuals which form the Epistles. More than anyone else, he formulated and set down the ideas that shaped the early development of Christian doctrine while his passion to spread the Good News of Christ created bodies of believers across the Eastern Mediterranean and led directly to the huge expansion of the church in the first century.

Reading Acts and of the Epistles reveals much about Paul's life and beliefs but as we read we tend to file what we learn under different headings. In our minds, what Paul said about grace and salvation is not linked with the culture in which he was brought up or what he experienced in his travels.

And because the audiences for these writings did not need to have the beliefs and practices of first century Judaism or first century paganism explained to them – they were fully familiar with these through their daily lives – the New Testament provides little insight into the cultural influences that shaped Paul’s view of the world and how God works in it.

This book attempts to make these connections, to address questions such as: what shaped Paul’s views about God and Christ; what was the nature of the Damascus Road experience that so changed his life; how do the ideas in his letters relate to his experiences at different stages of his ministry? In other words, it tries to provide a much more rounded and integrated account of Paul the man - his character, cultural background, experiences and teaching – than we would obtain just from reading Acts and the Epistles, although these of course remain the fundamental sources for what we know about him. This rounded picture then illuminates our understanding of Paul’s teaching.

Paul did not see himself as the proponent of a new religion. He was a man steeped in Jewish thinking and history who came to understand that in the person of Jesus Christ God was fulfilling all that his prophets had said about his purposes for Israel. And central to this was that the ‘new Israel’ would encompass all the peoples of the world. To this message, he devoted his life. This, the central theme of the book, is not novel but Wright shows how it runs through all that Paul did and wrote.

An example of how the biography brings new perspectives to familiar episodes in Paul’s life is its account of the events recorded in Acts 17 when Paul spoke to the Athenians on the Areopagus, the hill below the Parthenon. This is sometimes presented as an occasion when philosophical ideas were exchanged rather in the manner of a Senior Common Room. Not so, says Wright. This was the senior court of law in Athens and Paul was essentially charged with importing foreign gods into Athens, the same charge that had been laid before Socrates and had resulted in his death. Paul was at risk of losing his life. Wright’s detailed analysis shows that Paul’s response to the charge was not simply ‘I’m merely telling you the identity of the Unknown God to which there is already an altar’. It was far more

sophisticated, drawing on and creating links with the philosophies that were current in Athens to show that while what he was saying was new, it was not the totally 'foreign' import that the charge implied. This served to get him off the charge, but Wright makes it plain that it was a close-run thing; as Acts records, although the Athenians wanted to discuss matters further Paul prudently decided to leave the city.

Wright acknowledges that there are many gaps: aspects of Paul's life about which we would wish to know more. What was 'the thorn' in his flesh (2 Cor 12:7)? Did he actually go to Spain as he intended (Rom 15:24) - there are early writings that suggest that he did. Where were the Pastoral Epistles (to Timothy and Titus) written - if indeed Paul wrote them? Wright gives his views, based on many years of study, but accepts that these and many other matters remain issues for debate.

Tom Wright has written many books, both for theologians like himself, and for lay Christians who wish to deepen their understanding of Scripture. Anyone who has read one of his 'popular' books will know that he has an outstanding gift for clear expression of complex ideas. This book, however, demands more; it requires him both to offer an insight into Paul's mind and to tell the story of his life and travels in a vigorous and engaging manner. In this, he succeeds superbly; to quote one reviewer '.... he so brilliantly holds his own as a scholar, yet writes with a storyteller's narrative mastery.....illuminating all angles of Paul's humanity'.

If you wish to understand Paul better, read this book.

Roger Courtney

'Paul - a Biography' by Tom Wright (SPCK, £10.99)

Who's Who at St Mary's

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Services

The Church is open each week

Monday to Friday
between 9.30am and 3.00pm
and on Saturday
between 12.00noon and 2.00pm

Sunday

9.00am Holy Communion (said) in church
on 1st, 3rd & 5th Sunday only each month;
10.30am Morning Service in church and via Zoom
every Sunday;
5.30pm Encounter in church and via Facebook Live
on 1st Sunday of month only
(preceded at 5.00pm with refreshments)

Wednesday

12.30pm Holy Communion in church

Monday to Friday

9.30am Morning Prayer via Zoom

(for Zoom links please contact Church Office)

Please keep up to date with what is on offer
via our Facebook page
or the website www.stmaryswatford.org