

(Acts 10:34:43; 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; John 20:1-18)

Last week, I wished us all a happy birthday! George Gilbert Scott's restoration of this church building was dedicated on the 9th of April, 1860 – Easter Day of that year. So we are 159 years old!

Today, I would like to wish us all a happy birthday again! Our Diocese was established on the 20th of April 2014 – which means we are also 5 years old! 159 years old *and* 5 years old: how's that for all ages worshipping together!

As Bishop Nick likes to remind us, the Diocese of Leeds – which is a merger of the three former dioceses of Ripon and Leeds, Bradford and Wakefield – is a completely new venture. Never before had three separate dioceses been merged into one, so since that new beginning we have all had to learn as we go.

Two thousand years ago, something else completely new happened – leading to another new beginning, for the whole world! As we have just heard, early in the morning of that first Easter Day, Mary Magdalene discovered the empty tomb. Later, she encountered her risen Lord: he was recognisable as Jesus, and yet he was also different: transfigured, transformed; *risen*. Having seen, Mary went and told Peter along with the other disciple. This set off a chain-reaction of '*come and see*, and *go and tell*' that has eventually led to us being here today.

That new beginning which followed their encounter with the life-changing reality of the risen Christ meant that Mary, Peter, and the other disciples all had to adopt a 'learn as we go' approach. For them, 'come and see' led to both 'go and tell' and 'learn as we go'. And as we affirm today, in encountering that same life-changing reality this applies no less to us: we are drawn in to a journey – a pilgrimage – of life-long (as well as life-changing) learning.

Now if our Diocese is still grappling with its new identity – and 'three-in-one' must be a good place to be! – then its values of *Loving, Living, Learning* surely offer a life-giving way for our pilgrimage. And I do mean *us*: our Diocese is not separate from us; we are an integral part of it, just as we are St Mary's parish church. You see, there is no such thing as St Mary's church without us: together, we are the part of the worldwide Body of Christ who happen to meet in this beautiful 159-year-old building.

Whether we consider our collective part in the Diocese or our individual part in this church, perhaps the reaction to this week's devastating fire at another St Mary's church can help us better understand our corporate identity as Christians. With the falling of the roof and the spire of that ancient cathedral of 'Our Lady', there was an outpouring of grief amongst the people of Paris, of France as a whole, and further afield. Inevitably with grief, much of what was said was a grappling for words. Amidst the reality of France being a secular state, in which the Body of Christ resides in buildings maintained by the state, the historic significance of a building like Notre

Dame is multi-layered. And yet the spiritual aspect of that outpouring of grief shone through. Whilst a beautiful and ancient church building gives glory to God, even when empty (and even when scarred by fire), the Church as a body, and the place of prayer, is quite clearly understood to transcend mere buildings.

I found one expression used of the brave firefighters who had controlled the blaze striking: it was said that they had ‘saved’ the building. What a metaphor for Holy Week! Then came expressions of hope that the building which had been so badly scarred would rise again: ‘Resurgam’ and the new St Paul’s Cathedral – and the restored York Minster, though still bearing its scars if you look for them – were both cited as firm ground for that hope.

This spiritual aspect to reaction to the Notre Dame fire surely shows that we all relate to the place of mystery in our lives, and that we all carry with us what *we* call the Christian hope. Indeed, the anchor is used as a Christian symbol of hope – so just remember that, next time you go past a pub called the Hope and Anchor!

Our task as people who believe in that unprecedented event two thousand years ago, is once more today to ‘come and see’ and then to continue to ‘go and tell’ – so that others might do the same. Everyone, whether they feel able to express it or not, is looking for hope, and we can offer them a firm ground for the hope they long to cling to: that *anchorhold* they yearn for.

Our task as people who have declared through baptism or confirmation that we are disciples of Christ is to grow towards the full maturity that Christ already sees in us – by *Loving, Living, Learning*.

And our task as the people of St Mary’s parish church is to reach out to the local community in loving service – so that all may know that the risen Christ is reaching out to them. Indeed, our new vision statement expresses exactly that, for we aim to be ‘*a people and a place where love works*’.

Our Diocese is grappling with its new identity, defined as *Loving, Living, Learning*. The people of France are grappling for words to express their grief over Notre Dame, and in doing so stumbling across the spiritual element of their identity. We are grappling with the life-changing significance of encountering the risen Christ, in our individual and our collective lives.

For all of us, life is full of uncertainties, challenges and distractions. But as we celebrate the power of the resurrection and give thanks for the hope it brings we really do have nothing to fear. Our risen Lord is with us, always: he has assured us of that. Eternal life – life in its fullness – is God’s promise to us, and he wants us to be secure in that knowledge, not at some point in the future but *now*!

So today, with Mary we ‘come and see’ once more, and in doing so we are assured that there is firm ground for our Christian hope. With Mary we also feel compelled to ‘go and tell’, and to ‘learn as we go’.

As members of a two-thousand year old 'Easter people', we are *Loving, Living, Learning*. And as St Mary's parish church, we aim to be *a people and a place where love works*.

I began by wishing us all a happy birthday. I conclude by wishing us all a happy Easter.

Alleluia. Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia.