

## St Mary's Woodbridge

### Andy Todd's First Mass

It's wonderful to be with you here today for this great celebration. This is a great parish in which to serve and be formed; it was here that I learned so much about priestcraft from my training incumbent and your former incumbent and it was here that I saw some of the high points in the lives of God's people and some of the much lower and more difficult moments; and it was here that I was a part of some very humorous moments. All of those are important, for God gives us the gift of tears of sorrow and tears of joy and the veil between the two can be very thin.

Today is a day for tears of joy. Not for what Andy has done; I don't meant that rudely, Father; for what Andy has done primarily is add his 'yes' to God's ask. But, of course, God's asks are often demanding! So saying yes to God is what we each need to do, but we should thank Andy for listening, for hearing that call, and for opening his heart to it; and we should thank Sue as well, for this kind of call asks much from a partner too.

But primarily, we should thank God, for adding to the Church of God someone with the life-experience and intellect of our new priest here. But God needs more than that and asks more than that, for priestly ministry demands the priest to walk alongside people, rejoicing when they rejoice, crying when they cry, knowing that we can never know how people feel, but opening up heart and mind to empathise.

This ministry is incarnational, it is a way in which God can communicate with humanity; it follows in the way of Our Lord, who became one of us that we might become one with him.

Now, I've always been fascinated by fire; its light, its heat, its capacity to clean – to refine – its capacity to make food edible, and also its capacity to consume all in its path. It is one of the most extraordinary things in creation as it can appear almost out of nothing and nowhere. There is something very much of God in fire; indeed look at our first reading, God was in the fire. And think of the story that the prophet Daniel tells of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego – it is God who stops them being consumed by the fire.

Fire in scripture brings life and destroys life and in some instances, like with Moses and the burning bush, the bush is entirely unscathed by the experience; but when Moses realised it is God speaking to him from the fire, he covers his face – he is afraid to see God.

This is the sort of vision from which Andy has not shied away. For God calls from the strangest of places.

My RS teacher in my secondary school in Portsmouth told us that he had seen a vision of God in his milk bottles when he was in the toilet. We laughed and got detention. In fairness, I think we were worried more about the proximity of milk bottles to toilet than we were about the vision he told us of, for people see and experience strange things in strange ways. God's work is rarely bland! We can come face to face with God in the most extraordinary places and in seemingly bizarre ways.

For all that the Incarnation of God in Christ Jesus somehow made meeting God easier, it seems God still didn't quite get the measure of what freaks out the average human. Being born in human form he humbled himself; yes, but we now, and those people then, would look pretty quizzically at someone claiming to be God, and Jesus realises that he has to unfold the story gradually – even telling people not to tell.

In our Gospel reading today, we heard that wonderful story of Cleopas and his friend on the road to Emmaus. It is one of those stories that just seems to keep giving. It is, of course, another incarnational moment. Little do they know until late on in the story that the man walking with them is their Saviour.

It is, I think, a really important moment in Luke's Gospel. Luke is a master story teller. He tells us that right at the beginning of his narrative. He makes the point that plenty of other people have had a go at setting down the things about Jesus, but here is Luke's orderly account.

One of the features of Luke's Gospel is Jesus making his way to Jerusalem; that is where Christ's pilgrimage is heading; and that takes him in the end to the 'green hill without a city wall' as Mrs Alexander puts it. Jesus gets to Jerusalem and now, after his resurrection, he is to be found walking the wrong way – walking away from that city and catching up with Cleopas and his friend. Taking his own good news out to the world.

And what happened when they met this fellow pilgrim? Their eyes were kept from recognising him and they walked and they talked; Jesus taught them – opened the scriptures. You stupid men, he said, and slow of heart – do you not get it? Don't you understand that these things had to happen?

And then he went in with them and broke bread. Kaboom! The penny dropped. This is him, risen, glorified.

And what was the result? What did they make of it all?

'Did not our hearts burn within us', they said.

Did not our hearts burn within us? It's not a very Church of England way of speaking. We are more accustomed to 'nice service Vicar', 'heard every word', 'didn't like the hymn you chose', 'when's the next rota coming out' and on a really good day 'that was meaningful'.

What Andy has been called to be – and it is a case of *being* before *doing* – is to bring some of the Emmaus road to Woodbridge. He is called to walk with you – sometimes in what might seem to him to be completely the wrong direction. That is a key nugget of presbyteral ministry – to be prepared to walk the wrong way – in order to walk with God's people. Because it is in that accompaniment of God's people that trust is built and hearts are prepared for the burning fire of God's love.

Andy is called to open the scriptures – in preaching and teaching in the moments when the spirit might call in a simple said Eucharist to say something about the text he has just read. Andy, when the spirit moves, you must respond. When something tells you that something needs to be said even in a simple celebration to open the scriptures to the people in your care – don't wonder, say it – but preferably in under five minutes!

And Andy is ordained – set aside to break the bread. Some would argue that anyone can preside at Holy Communion, that the Church is only a human-made creation and hampers God's people.

There is a grain of truth in that; but unless there has been a fairly seismic shift, I wouldn't have said that your new priest is an archetypal 'establishment' man. Yet, he has been ordained into the Church of God to preach and teach and celebrate the sacraments as the Church of England has received the Christian faith.

The Church of England is far from perfect – and that is something of its strength; it is not a monochrome expression of the faith either, which leads to some division and that is also something of its strength.

For the sake of order, we follow structures laid down in scripture and tradition in the orders of Bishop, Priest and Deacon and for all the foibles in the way that the Church of England has received that ministry, it is important that we hold on to that.

For Andy is called to be a focus of unity and one of the expressions of that unity comes when presiding at the service we call Holy Communion – a service in which we are in communion with one another and with God; he presides at the Eucharist – the Church's thanksgiving feast; he is the lead celebrant at the Mass – the place from which we are sent out; *ite missa est* are the final words of the Latin Mass – translated directly – Go, you are dismissed, but for the Church it has a deeper meaning, for it is linked to 'missio' or mission. So, the mass ends and the mission begins! The same service, different names and for any of us gathered we might come with a particular agenda. What is unchangeable is that like those disciples on the road to Emmaus, Christ is present and we know that presence in the unfolding of scripture and in the breaking of bread; we become companions – those who break bread - with Christ and one another.

Cleopas and his friend discovered that their hearts burned within them.

Andy, may your heart always burn within you for love of your Lord and your God and for love of the people whom God has called you to serve, as by the grace of the Holy Spirit Christ's presence is made real amongst us.

Amen.