

TRINITY 14: 2026

Well, greetings all – have you missed me?!

My thanks, as ever, to Fr Peter for looking after you all in my absence. I will speak more on this shortly, but our ‘retired priests’ are the backbone of the C of E particularly in our rural and village outposts up and down the land. We depend upon them ‘to cover’ as we say, but actually it isn’t just that, it is more. We need priests and their age is irrelevant; they live and walk alongside all of us as a pastoral and sacramental presence in sometimes hostile or at least, agnostic territory.

But first, on this opening Sunday of the month when Sarah and I come on to you, breathless, just before 11am, you must have worked it out: that only Sarah has to listen to the same sermon twice, despite my odd change here and there, for better or worse! Well today, I am on overtime! A completely different address was offered for the Patronal festival earlier at Great Bealings... compared to this more rambling one!

I always hope that even on your holidays you still go to Church? I would love to hear from you if you have learnt something new or wondrous that you think we could also follow or do? Like so many clergy, I am the world’s worst at being a visitor dropping in to another Church unannounced, in ‘civvies’. Sometimes I draw breath (ask Liz) at what happens or doesn’t happen...whether we are even welcomed at all, never mind the unfolding liturgy, lack of music, or lack of children and young families!

The good news is that on the last two Sundays, in different Cumbrian village communities of faith, I heard really heart-warming, challenging sermons from priests who looked as old and wise as Moses! The last one I heard actually gave the congregation homework to do, so watch out! It turned out that he used to work as the Principal of 'Whitelands' teacher training college (now part of Roehampton University) in what, I think is, part of the Southwark Diocese. His sermon was about 'taking risks' and he even chose a special hymn on that theme to end our celebration Mass.

So, dear brothers and sisters, there's still hope for me and you yet...to hear God's call, to proclaim His word; for new priests or old, to preside at any empty altar which needs people to come and receive gifts of grace - which is God's sacramental heart and offering for all of us. God's 'open table' is here, or there, for everyone to be welcomed, fed and nourished whether on this side of the A12 or well beyond. So we do need to pray for more priests, for new vocations because, to quote our Gospel reading, "whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

Exciting or frightening as it may be for the latest London taxis to be driverless, I hope you believe as I do, that our clergy will never be either replaced or automated by AI (virtual priests, can you imagine?)...but instead, keep the Holy Spirit's work bodily alive and animated: in each and every generation to come, and in each and every parish. God doesn't do things by halves. It is all or nothing. I am convinced that St Matthew was saying something very similar, and quite urgently.

Whatever the disagreements or difficulties, both inside or outside the life of our Churches, stand up for the light of Christ - and let it shine, let it shine! Whatever the difficulties or disagreements within our County or Town, show God's grace and light in how you listen, how you act, and how you serve these different communities.

Only the other day, something clergy often hear and many of you will also hear: someone says "I'm not religious but..." So often this is a heartfelt and open invitation to share something more together, rather than anyone pointing out any sense of shame or guilt or judgment on another. So yes, the Christian story **is** worth delving into and exploring, warts and all, just as our belonging to this Benefice community is worth exploring wider and deeper, warts and all.

Which takes me nicely on to the archaeological watching brief while I have been away...the unearthing, literally, of three different human remains as well as those of children and animals alongside and underneath, our churchyard boundary wall. I feel sure there is more to discover, to unravel, and to learn. But that is also true of our pilgrimage of faith, our knowing and unknowing, our dependence upon God, and our running away. Despite Matthew's challenging teaching and advice or, for that matter, St Paul's more dogmatic preaching, we are led back, encouraged, to the place we should begin from: "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."

Thanks be to our God present in all creation: yesterday, today,
and for ever. AMEN.