

Taking Tea!

Bromley Parish Church

25th October 2018

Bible Refs: Isaiah 40.25-31; Romans 12.9-21

Service; Diamond Jubilee of Fellowship

First of all, congratulations to Bishop Simon on his consecration! It's good to be with him as we've known each other since his days at Biggin Hill, St Mary's Plaistow, Chislehurst and thence on to Rochester. His pastoral approach and thoughtful reflections will now be of great benefit to an even wider audience.

And congratulations of course to the Bromley Parish Church Fellowship on its Diamond Jubilee. It's a great privilege to be with all today. When I was Vicar here it was of course then known as the Women's Fellowship, and it's good that it has moved with the times and become more inclusive; although men have I think always been welcome!

Tea is quintessentially part of the English culture that I think we should make more of. But in these days of rushing everything and eating ‘on the go’ and out of cardboard, to have tea is a real treat. And by tea I mean: sandwiches, (do you take the crusts off? are they in triangles?), possibly scones (or ‘scowns’ depending on how you like to pronounce it) with jam (and possibly cream), and cakes (which can be double or even triple decker), with the occasional choux pastry, chocolate éclair thrown in and I can see people are beginning to salivate already and lose concentration on the service and already dreaming of tea.

But of course tea is more than the food. Only just - but there is more to tea than just the food and drink.

I want to share with you three pictures from other walks of life that I think illustrate what the Fellowship is about. The last one is not quite as serious as the first two, but it has its significance.

When I was a Royal Naval Association chaplain in my Dartford days, I would pop in to the RNA club which was a large hall just outside the Vicarage where they met of an evening. It was great fun as there was always a lot of banter going on between those who served either at Dartmouth or Chatham, or Portsmouth.

And if you were a marine you were definitely suspect! But once on board ship they were known as **the ship's company**.

Whatever their rank they were all part of the same body. And this sense of fellowship showed when they were in the RNA. Fiercely competitive between ships and ports, if anyone was in need they came together and supported them. And it was their sense of fellowship, companionship, that shone through. This is strong in all the armed forces for they have learnt their need of that sort of friendship especially when the going gets tough. They had learnt their need of each other.

So first of all, I liken the Fellowship to being along the same lines - part of a Ship's Company.

The second is from another organisation called 'Emmaus'. I realise there are courses called 'Emmaus' in the church but this is an international organisation which was inspired by a French priest called Father Pierre in the aftermath of the second world war when there were so many people displaced in Europe who were homeless and who had no work. In the dreadful winter of 1947 many starved to death on the streets of Paris and it was Fr Pierre that was so moved that he raised enough money almost overnight to get the first home going for the homeless. Emmaus has now grown so much that it has homes all over the world and we managed to get one off the ground in the Medway towns. The strap line that it used for many years was 'A bed to sleep in at night and a reason for getting out of it in the morning.' Those who came to Emmaus were not only given shelter and a home but they were also expected to work. So, many of the houses now have furniture workshops, cafes, and garden nurseries where the people work as they recover a sense of self-worth and begin to rebuild their lives, many of whom have had terrible stories to tell of lost work, breakdown of marriage, addiction to drug or alcohol, and who eventually end up homeless and living

on the streets. With Terry Waite as its President it's a great organisation to be involved with. But the question was: What do you call those who become part of each home, each small community? They decided that they would be '**companions**'.

From the ship's company spring the companions, or to turn the ship's company around it becomes **companionship**.

And of course the word 'company' comes from the French words 'com' and 'pain' - meaning 'sharing bread'. So this provides us with the clue that food is part and parcel of the way we human beings like to meet - over a meal. For that's when we have to sit and hopefully talk, not all at the same time nor with food in your mouth (as my mother used to tell me!). And for Christians it has particular significance in the Eucharist where we share bread together to remind us of the very real presence of Jesus Christ.

I believe that this sort of companionship found in organisations like the Fellowship is going to be just as important in the future as it is now. Possibly more so.

The *Daily Mail*¹ (I think that must be the first time I've ever quoted from the Daily Mail!) reported very recently that the number of middle-aged people living alone in the UK has jumped by about a half over the past two decades. The Office for National Statistics had revealed that there were 2.43 million 45 to 64-year-olds living on their own in 2017, compared with 1.59 million in 1996. That is a real shift in the way we are ordering our lives now. That's not to say that all people living on their own are going to be lonely. Loneliness is not about being solitary: it's about being isolated, cut off, forgotten, not valued. (And sadly some of our young people in schools are admitting to that as well.) The next highest group was those women living alone over the age of 75.

¹ 23rd October 2018

This is of course not to say that everyone that attends such an organisation is lonely but it does provide the space to meet as people who enjoy human company; which hopefully we all do. And let's be honest it also helps us in older age to find new friends when so many of our long-standing and much loved friends have died.

It's the ship's company, the shared companionship.

And it's good that a place of faith is providing this. For people of faith are people of hope. That Old Testament passage from the great prophet Isaiah acknowledges the frailty of human life, whether young or old, but ends with a really upbeat image of hope for the future despite all that we know of the present and the past:

*Those who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength,
They shall mount up like eagles.
They shall run and not grow weary,*

*They shall walk and not faint.*²

I said there were three pictures I wanted to share with you. The last is not so serious but I hope just as meaningful.

A Vicar, who shall be nameless decided at the All Age Sunday Worship he would ask the children to bring illustrations of a favourite biblical verse. They were to bring it the next Sunday and they would share this with the congregation.

The next Sunday duly came and the Vicar, who shall be nameless, duly called the children up. There was not an immediate rush. But eventually one little girl brought up a woolly lamb. ‘And what’s the verse you’re thinking of?’ the Vicar asked. “Jesus is the Good Shepherd’ came the reply.

Next a little boy came up carrying a candle. ‘ Jesus is the Light of the World’ he said, and the Vicar praised him. Good choice.

² Isaiah 40.31

Lastly a lively six year old girl strode down the nave towards the Vicar. He knew then that he was in trouble. She was grasping very tightly a very large red lollipop. The Vicar looked at her and asked her, as he had to, what verse she was remembering with this very large lollipop. She looked at him intently. ‘Hold fast to that which is good’³.

She was right. We heard that verse in the second reading from St Paul. He might not have been thinking off lollipops when he wrote it! But he knew, like us, that with good things - they don’t just happen. The work behind the scenes, the commitment is priceless. So is the Bromley Parish Church Fellowship.

So: at this anniversary time ‘Hold fast to that which is good’!

³ Romans 12.9