

THEIRS IS THE KINGDOM OF

HEAVEN 125th Anniversary of St Mark's

Noel Park

Saturday November 1st 2014

Preached by The Rt Revd Dr Stephen Platten

Late in the afternoon, on a weekday in early December 1962, as a schoolboy, I was – so to speak – evicted from a 629 trolleybus at the foot of Jolly Butchers' Hill in Wood Green, on my way home to Enfield. This was not because I had committed any misdemeanour, but simply because the bus could go no further. Instead it was retiring to its depot opposite Wood Green underground station (still there, of course). We could go no further since this was the first evening of the last *London Smog!* I wrapped my school scarf over my mouth as I set out to walk the final four or five miles home, and just glanced back. All I could see through the *fugg* was the *Wills' Gold Flake* advert on Noel Park railway bridge, which at that time still crossed Wood Green High Road, just north of where the Shopping City bridge now runs.

Much has changed since those days – no trolleybuses, no railway bridge, no *Bartons Department* store in the High Road, nor indeed the ATV studios inside Frank Matcham's splendid Wood Green Empire. Happily, however, what *has* survived is Rowland Plumble's visionary Noel Park Estate, one of a number of estates in London built by the Artisans, Labourers and General Dwellings Company in the valley of the River Moselle; Queen's Park in Paddington is another survivor. Plumble's vision was of what we would now call 'affordable housing' but in a tree-lined Arcadian setting. St Mark's Church was to be the centre-piece, as indeed it still is.

I shall not wax lyrical for too long about St Mark's Venetian Gothic flair and other architectural details, but I shall advert to the figure (amongst those carved into the pulpit) of Bishop Walsham How. How is another interesting link for me with this church, for How was the first Bishop of Wakefield and I was to end up being the last one. Before Wakefield, however, Walsham How was Bishop of Bedford which - in modern translation - means effectively the Bishop of Stepney plus a bit of the Bishop of Edmonton; he was a Suffragan Bishop in London who did great work with amongst other things the Shropshire Mission to East London; that Mission had a base here which is now the Noel Park Children's Centre. How had been a parish priest in Shropshire and is buried in the churchyard of the parish of which he'd had the cure.

How was much loved in East and North London and might well have stayed, had not the new Bishop of London at the time felt threatened by Walsham How's knowledge of, and care for, the city and thus his subsequent popularity among the people. How was an intelligent, holy and pastoral bishop – there are indeed still some around – and we have one alongside me in this great building now – but I shall not embarrass your Right Reverend Father in God further as he prepares for retirement. But How's ministry takes us directly to our gospel for today, that of the Beatitudes.

That list of virtues was the pattern of life which Bishop How himself lived and which he encouraged in others. It is one of the most attractive passages in Holy Scripture and I imagine it radiates its message within whichever language into which it is translated. It is nothing less than a description of life lived in God, as we are called to do, through our Lord Jesus Christ. The final

phrase, describing those who would follow Christ, brings it all together: ‘Blessed are they, for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.’

So, on this day, we give thanks, first and foremost, for the countless people who, over this past one hundred and twenty five years, have worshipped here and cared for *all* the people of Noel Park. For, as part of the Catholic Church in this land, that has been the responsibility of parish priests and lay people for more than twelve decades. This is, then, a thanksgiving for all who have travailed for the gospel. What can we say of this travail?

Now, Mark is your patron, and of all the gospel writers he indicates most sharply the struggle and passion which Jesus endured and not only in those last seven days of his life. In his splendid hymn, Walsham How, alongside extolling the glory of the saints, acknowledges this travail for all who would follow Jesus: ‘We feebly struggle, they in glory shine.’

But today is, of course, as I said, a day of profound thanksgiving. That passage we heard from the Letter to the Hebrews captures the spirit:

‘You have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem . . . and to Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant,’

This is the same Jesus who elsewhere is referred to in the Letter to the Hebrews as the ‘pioneer and perfecter of our faith.’ He exemplifies the perfect inhabitant of the *city* of the living God.

These words should resound in our ears for cities all too often receive a bad press. Yet today it is this small part of God’s Acre, this part of this great city, Rowland Plumbe’s vision, for which we give thanks. Thirty years ago, *Faith in the City* challengingly set out a prophetic Christian critique of our cities – *and* its impact changed people’s lives.

In that, however, it was not unique. For Christian prophetic voices have helped offer a modern vision of the city over the one hundred and twenty five years of St Marks’ parish. So, for example, Octavia Hill, an Anglican, and one of the founders of the National Trust worked relentlessly for the poor of London. Charles Jenkinson, a parish priest in one of the poorest areas of south Leeds, had the vision to push through the building of the Belle Isle Estate there. Norman Shaw, the builder of the Bedford Park Estate in West London – buried in Hampstead Churchyard – similarly found his vision for the city springing from his Christian faith.

But this place, here in Noel Park, is part of that very same vision. For, as we give thanks for one hundred and twenty five years of St Mark’s, we give thanks too for the work of Rowland Plumbe, your builder here, whose vision for good housing for the less well off, issued too from his Christian faith.

Returning to our first reading this afternoon, Solomon is keen to show that God cannot be confined to buildings, but he saw too that without a temple God might be forgotten. St Mark’s starts, then, as a symbol of Plumbe, and of Walsham How’s commitment to Christian care and nurture, but also to their praise and worship of God. So we have just sung:

‘From earth’s wide bounds, from
ocean’s farthest coast Through

gates of pearl stream in
the countless host –
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost.
Alleluia.’

Amen

Readings

I Kings 8. 22-30

Hebrews 12. 18-
24

Matthew 15. 1-12