

**LOYAL AND ORTHODOX**  
Bromley and Sheppard's College  
350<sup>th</sup> Anniversary  
Sunday October 16<sup>th</sup> 2016  
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Walking down London's Oxford Street at the present time, one of the most interesting encounters is with Selfridge's windows. Like the theatrical building it is, often its windows put on a show. This time it's Shakespearean on the four hundredth anniversary of his death. The windows are well worth seeing – based on quotations from the bard's plays. But in London this year also there is another great anniversary. It is shared with you here at Bromley and Sheppard's – as it is a 350<sup>th</sup>.

Early September 350 years ago saw the Great Fire of London which burnt for almost a week. In a fascinating piece, Loyd Grossman, the doyen of pasta sauce, writes of the 'revolutionary' effects of that fire. Before that great conflagration, London was a medium-sized city smaller than Florence, Paris, Rome and Milan. Forty years later it had risen phoenix-like from the fire to become the greatest city in the world. Having achieved that, Grossman reflected, it has remained so up to the present day. Good to hear such an accolade about our capital from an American!

What is fascinating, of course, both of the Great Fire and of your foundation, is that of these two tragedies there would issue a triumphant and rich result. For, as you here will all know well, it was John Warner, erstwhile Bishop of Rochester – bishop of one of the oldest sees in the land, who would found this place. Warner was deprived of his see during Cromwell's Commonwealth. So, knowing the experience of homelessness, he founded this college 'for twenty poor widows of orthodox and loyal clergymen.'

Now, happily I shall have insufficient time with you to carry out a thorough means test on the level of poverty of everyone who lives here now. But, even in this short time here, knowing at least one of your residents and of his impeccable orthodoxy, I'm sure that the college lives up to its title deeds.

So, then, we have seen that out of terrible experiences of adversity there can spring extraordinary acts of generosity and also periods of rich growth. Lives can be transformed effectively by passing through the traumas of tragedy and adversity. Of course, as a Christian community, this should hardly surprise us. For, such a truth lies at the heart of our faith. Jesus experienced no 'easy resurrection'. Before his exaltation, vindication – before he was raised from the dead, he endured the privations, humiliations and ultimately the terrifying sentence of crucifixion.

But how does this play out for you here today? Even a brief glance at our two readings points us in the right direction. That Pauline extract we heard probably includes the earliest Christian hymn of which we know. That section of that piece which talks of Christ 'emptying himself and taking the form of a servant' is almost certainly a hymn which predates Paul himself. So, from earliest days, Christian people gathered together in community to praise and thank God for their redemption in Jesus. In those few verses is encapsulated the *incarnation* – God humbles himself, empties himself to become one of us. Then he is obedient to death on the cross.

Our gospel reading takes us a stage further on. For not only do Christian people come together *in community* to sing hymns. They also rehearse the entire drama of salvation. For that is what we do in every eucharist, and this passage from John's gospel is, of course, entirely Eucharistic: 'I am the bread of life', says Jesus; 'He who comes to me shall not hunger, and he who believes in me shall never thirst.' In contrast to the other three gospels, there is no rehearsal of the institution narrative. But there is the equivalent of the last supper with the washing of the

disciples' feet. So, the full load of the eucharist itself is effectively born by this sixth chapter of John's gospel.

So, out of the tragedy of Christ's death, pre-empted by the disciples' last supper together, issues the triumph of the resurrection. This creates God's Church, which is manifested day by day, week by week in the Holy Eucharist. In a unique way, then, Bromley and Sheppard's Colleges have lived the eucharistic life as few other Christians have done.

When I was in my late teens, just after I left school, I was keen to meet up with my greatest friend from school days. Where shall we meet, I asked him? 'Why not spend a weekend', he replied, 'in the Franciscan Friary near to my university.' So, it was to Alnmouth Friary that I would go. There I would see the gospel lived as I'd never seen it before – entirely in community. The friars prayed five times a day, they had given up all possessions and they also looked after ex-offenders. All this transformed my life – I almost became a friar! Why, because *here* the life that Jesus gives us was truly lived and celebrated.

So, your 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary is a unique and richly layered celebration of all that derives from living, laughing, sometimes sorrowing and regularly making eucharist together. So today it is literally *Alleluia, Praise the Lord Christ* for all he gives us daily in this place as we live out our lives together  
Amen.

Readings:

Philippians. 2 1-11

John. 6. 35-40.