

Sermon for Sunday 1 May 2022 (Third Sunday of Easter) – Revd Stephen Earl

May I speak in the name of the risen, living, Lord Jesus, the Father and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So here we are. The last time from this pulpit, the last time preaching for quite a while, but the message is for us all, there is still much work to be done in the Lord's name, for his sake. I'm reminded of a cartoon I have in my study with the caption, I've got the little card here with a rather anxious looking person depicted - you probably can't see it from where you are - but the message is this: 'God put me on Earth to accomplish a certain number of things. Right now I am so far behind, I think I will never die.' Well, that's how it feels a bit, particularly in relation to getting ready for a move. However, both you, my dear friends, as the vacancy begins, what used to be called an interregnum, and for Abi and myself, as soon we are moving on to a new place, to whatever the good Lord has in store for us there, work to be done. There is work to be done for us all, as a new chapter begins and something for us all, I think, as a step into the unknown.

In the two appearances of our risen Lord that we heard this morning, in our epistle reading, our first reading, and our Gospel reading, Jesus is very clear to those who would follow him. There is work to be done in his name, even though no longer with them in person, and as a new chapter is unfolding, and far more so for them than for us. Their new chapter was a giant leap into the unknown and into uncharted waters. In each of these readings, Jesus addresses the two great pioneer founders of the Church, as they became known, St Peter and St Paul, after whom this Church and so many others are dedicated. And his message, in effect, of work to be done was not just for those two key individuals, but for all the disciples then and since, and certainly for us. The statuettes of St Peter and St Paul just above the port entrance - you may not have noticed them before, but they are there - looking down on all our comings and goings from this place remind us of God's work still to be done. Paul, as we heard in the introduction to the reading, hitherto Saul in his dramatic vision on the road to Damascus, is depicted beautifully in the stained glass window in our Lady Chapel, was told to enter the city where he would be given his instructions.

This morning we didn't read on to hear the unfolding of the story, but we, most of us I'm sure, know it so well, how this former, zealous, persecutor of the followers of the Way, does a complete U-turn and boldly now professes Jesus as Lord, as Son of God, as he'll continue to do for the rest of his life until his martyrdom in Rome, and not after three extensive missionary journeys throughout a great deal of Asia Minor, as it was then, as told in the rest of the Book of Acts. And despite shipwrecks and imprisonment, a mission shared not only with those who accompanied him on those journeys, but with the other Apostles who spread the Good News all over the then known world. St Paul, it's been calculated not by me, I hasten to add, travelled some ten thousand miles on his missionary journeys, as well as penning a similar number of words comprising about a third of the New Testament.

Moving on to the Gospel of John, we find Peter no doubt recoiling from his grief and guilt and confusion in betraying Jesus back in Jerusalem, here again now in Galilee, with his friends, once more at the lake, and recommissioned by the risen Lord for the work that lay ahead. During this amazing and moving encounter

at the very place of the first callings three years before, the risen Jesus again breaks bread and shares fish, just as he had done nearby earlier for the five thousand. And he says to Peter, 'Feed my sheep, tend my sheep, feed my sheep', as if each of these new commissions were cancelling his three earlier denials in the courtyard of the high priest, this new commissioning equips him for the all-important new chapter ahead, the work to be done, and the great many challenges that he will face. And just as those words of Jesus from the cross entrusting Mary, his mother, to the beloved John, saying, 'Behold, my mother', were words for every disciple in our calling to care for the vulnerable and the needy. So with these commissioning of both St Peter and St Paul, similarly we can take them for us all to proclaim Jesus and continue his Ministry wherever we happen to be.

Hmm, I thought to myself, Isn't retirement going to be restful and relaxing? Well, who knows, God may have other plans. A coincidence, I wonder, that Revd Graham kindly paved the way last week in a chance meeting with the vicar where we'll be moving to. I wonder what he said. No worries, and don't feel left out. There will be plenty to do here for you all, as ever, including Revd Graham.

Peter and the disciples had probably thought it was all over, returning to their home territory and familiar tasks, a sort of semi-retirement. But that's not what Jesus had in mind, in the very place where it all began, with a calling and a miraculous catch of fish. Now, with the risen Christ, there's a renewed commissioning, a renewed calling and another miraculous catch of fish to mark the start of an important new chapter and a whole lot more to be done. For the disciples by the lake, and for Paul heading for Damascus, these encounters with the risen Lord weren't an end, but an exciting, if daunting, new beginning, as this day is for all of you, and for Abi and me. Just as the disciples face many surprises and new challenges in what lay ahead, I guess it will be too in the outworking of God's plans as we place ourselves at his disposal.

Our calling, our commission, is simply to trust and follow wherever he leads. For you, for Abi and me, looking to the future, a time to discover new callings, new guidance, new gifts, new experiences, and new opportunities for service, as we say yes to what he has in store for us.

Now. I could have ended the sermon here, and I'm sure Abi would have thought I should do, but allow me on my last chance of preaching just to go on a little further, because between our present home we'll be leaving behind just over the road and our new home in Norfolk, lies, I'm sure you know, the city of Norwich, where sometime in the late 14th or early 15th century, in a small cell, the anchorite Mother Julian, prayed constantly and wrote her theological reflection, Revelations of Divine Love, based on some earlier visions she had had. I think the most quoted lines from her celebrated work are those reproduced at the bottom of the Pewsheets: 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' Julian had lived through the plague in the city with its devastating effects, quite possibly affecting those she knew personally. Yet she remained ever faithful and trusting in God's future. And so should we. If you happen to be in Norwich, do pay a visit to her cell, much as it was then in the Church named after her, St Julian's, of course, a short walk it is over the river from the railway station, not far from the city centre, and there you'll see a rather lovely stained glass window. A clipped part of the window is on the Pewsheets that's been added since, of course, of Mother Julian with those words, 'All shall be well.'

No better time than for us all to be looking to the future, our respective futures in faith and hope, than this wonderfully joyful season of Easter as we celebrate our Lord's resurrection and promise of new life and new beginnings, far from an end, a time to discern instead, as St Peter and St Paul, are callings to that which lies ahead.

Abi and I thank you all deeply for your love and friendship over the years. We'll very much look forward to hearing news of Lavenham and Preston St Mary as we have continued to do through receiving the magazine of our former parishes of Burwell and Reach. As we continue, we'll continue to be praying for you. Do please remember to pray for us as we move on – apart in distance, though not really very far yet, importantly, together in Christ. Let us go forth then in hope and faith and love, in joyful service to the risen Lord who equips and blesses all his sense for that which he calls us to, in the knowledge that 'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.' Amen.