

SERMON ST PHILIP'S – SUNDAY 01 JANUARY 2017

In the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Glance around this building. Is anything different? Some eleven hours ago, after a one second delay for the leap second, on the stroke of midnight, this building became a church.

You might think that it looks much like it did on Christmas Day or indeed the Sunday before. But in fact St Philip's was until this morning technically a closed church being used as a licensed place of worship. This arose as a result of legal changes made in April 2000 to allow for the reordering of the site to what we have now. But we were never made a church again until this morning.

Furthermore, we're not just now a church but a Parish Church. During the building works of 2000-2004 our congregation shrank and on Michael Forrest's retirement in 2004 it was decided to merge St Philip's into the Parish of St Mary Abbots with a half time priest. It was not clear that regular Sunday services would continue here. And so a scheme in January 2006 abolished the Parish of St Philip, Kensington, which is why David was technically only associate Vicar.

A number of us always felt that this under-played the role of St Philip's. We saw a need for a diverse, friendly community church which involved children and neither had too much formal high church ritual, nor neglected the sacraments. Under David's leadership, we set about building that vision.

A key step was to sort out the finances, both through the generosity of all of you, and by ensuring that members of the community are renting out parts of our building more or less from dawn to dusk seven days a week. Indeed at the very moment that this building became once again a church, there were

two groups celebrating the New Year in our halls. Since 2012, our contributions to the diocese, principally to fund clergy training, salaries, pensions and housing, have fully met the costs as if we were already an independent parish. And since 2013, we have paid in more, to help cover the costs of churches within our Deanery, in North Kensington, where the spiritual need is just as great but many people are struggling in poverty – and it is tougher for a church to pay its way.

But we also needed to grow our congregation and establish ourselves in the community. All this has been done, but there is of course more to do.

So it is with huge joy that this progress has been recognised by the church authorities and that this morning a new scheme has come into effect which creates the Parish of St Philip Earl's Court Road with this building as the Parish Church. Now, we have to justify the faith that the church authorities have put in us, and make our new beginning.

And a new beginning was just what the Holy Family had to start when fleeing from Herod. But while we have a fine building and a strong team of volunteers and paid staff – though we'd always like more volunteers – the Holy Family had nothing but the newly arrived Christ Child. They made a new beginning as a family. We can be grateful that the Egyptian authorities of the time either didn't find them, or chose not to turn them back to Herod and his marauding gang.

They made a home and a living in their adopted country. And when it was safe to return, they went back to Israel and made their home in Nazareth.

Refugees are having a bad name with some people at the moment. They fear that there are a lot of them. That some may be economic migrants. Perhaps, it is whispered, our welfare system is a soft touch? Worst of all, there is a fear that among the refugees that may be people with an agenda to harm us.

I think it is right to acknowledge these concerns. But the answer cannot simply be to shut up shop; to raise the drawbridge. The story of the Holy Family tells us that there are genuine needs which have to be met. More recently, Britain took some Jews from Germany following Kristallnacht. They came, settled and contributed greatly to their adopted country. Sir Nicholas Winton rescued hundreds of children from Prague and was justly honoured once the story came to light fifty year later. In total, Britain took fewer than 100,000 Jews in the late 1930s, including my father. It was a valuable commitment, but over 7 million perished in the Holocaust. Did we do enough? Would we have saved the Holy Family?

How should we respond to the needs of refugees in these current days? In September 2015, David Cameron said we would act with our hearts and with our heads. We would provide temporary places of safety near the trouble area, and resettle people in a controlled process. We would use the best possible techniques to keep ourselves safe from any who might wish us harm. Was this the right balance? That – like the scale of the programme - is a political question, but it is surely right to do what we sensibly can to help those, like the Holy Family, fleeing from persecution.

And of course, as well as providing safety, we need to think about the nature of the new beginning we are providing. Will the new beginning we provide equip the refugees to make their way in modern Britain? What do we need to do to make that as likely as possible?

The Holy Family were able to make a living in Egypt and return to Israel, settling in Nazareth, where their child was able to grow up ready to be our Lord and Saviour. Now we need to think about the new beginning that St Philips is making as we become a parish and seek a new Vicar.

The Grace of God has led us through difficult times, through the pains of growth, and through periods of great joy to the point where once again we are an independent parish within the Church of England. We will continue in a team ministry with St Mary Abbots and Christ Church which will allow us to share perspectives, but they are no longer responsible for us. We will need to work ourselves, with God, to take forward his mission.

It's wholly appropriate that this change has come about with the New Year. Not only will it be helpful to me in drawing up the accounts, but more importantly our new organisation, our new beginning guided by God, is happening at a time symbolised by the fresh start of the New Year.

King George VI beautifully summed this up in his Christmas 1939 message, as the country, at war, faced an uncertain future, by quoting from a previously obscure poem drawn to his attention by the young Princess Elizabeth:

And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:

“Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.”

And he replied:

“Go out into the darkness and put your hand in the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way.”

Our circumstances at St Philip's this New Year are a great deal more propitious than those in 1939. But there is of course some uncertainty as we start this new chapter – this new beginning – in St Philip's history. That chapter starts here, today, with us. So look around again. This is St Philip's Earls Court Road. Your Parish Church. Let us together put our hands into the hand of God and pray that he will show us the Way.

Amen