**2nd June 2019 Sermon by Ruth Martin, Diocesan Secretary and Reader at Richmond Team Ministry**

The Feast of the Ascension, which we have just celebrated this last Thursday, seems to be one of those festivals that is pushed to the fringes of our churches today, yet it marks the bittersweet reality of faith being lived by Christians. That bittersweet reality is that whilst we can be hugely encouraged in our faith on the first Easter morning , and we can be amazed as the first disciples were as the narratives of Jesus appearances to his disciples following the resurrection unfold , the Ascension marks a turning point in our own responsibilities.

Jesus is leaving his disciples and going to the Father, so where does that leave us? The responsibilities of those early disciples really kicked in from the Ascension, their growth and transformation, from fear and doubt to a stronger faith in Jesus the Christ prepares the way for the disciples to become the body of Christ. We are those disciples today. And next Sunday, Pentecost, when we celebrate the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, we recall that this made it possible for the early disciples -and today for us -to be guided in all wisdom as living, loving people of faith, through the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

It is the Holy Spirit teaching us how to be His loyal servants in our own times.

As Jesus says in Johns Gospel that we hear today, ‘I ask this not only for those here, but those who will believe in me ...I in them and you, Father, in me, so we are one ‘.

Whilst the Ascension is a glorious moment and enables us in the next nine days to focus on our prayer life as we anticipate Pentecost, it is also therefore an in between time; the first disciples saw Jesus depart and are now waiting, waiting for what comes next. In some ways not so different to how our parishes feel in an interregnum - you are waiting for your next Rector , for what happens next , and in the meantime your church wardens have decided that this is a good time for a stewardship campaign, so you are ready!

The Ascension also marks a very sobering time for our reflection and prayer. What God put His Son through, sending us God incarnational, in a human being who would have a very bloody painful end to his human life is an extraordinary sacrifice. It is God, generous God, giving a new meaning to Life, through the life and Ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ.

And are these two themes, God’s generosity to us through his Son, and Our enabling to be the body of Christ through the Holy Spirit, that are the pillars of our own generosity to others.

‘I in them and you, Father, in me so we are one’.

It is God’s generosity to us which is the starting point for our own generous giving, our own stewardship of the responsibilities we can eagerly take on to make a difference. And generosity is not of course just about money, also time, prayer and talents - but it is also about money.

The Parish Support fund, the means by which we can sustain ministry across our diocese, is now in its fourth year.

I wasn’t the Diocesan Secretary when the decision was taken to change the scheme, but I was appointed to implement it.

Now the old system was not, in all frankness, encouraging of growth! Basically, each parish was assessed on income and numbers of those giving and asked to give a specific amount. It felt a little like our normal reaction to Council Tax, most us don’t jump with joy when if and when it goes up!

The current scheme is based on informed generosity , seeking to give what we can form the heart , giving both financially and also giving of our time, giving through our prayers, it is grounded theologically in Gods generosity to us that we in turn wish to show in love and faith to others .

Most of our parishes are engaged in mission locally in their communities, and some, in mission literally globally, supporting sanitation, schools, in third world countries where simply continuing to live, getting by day by day is a struggle.

And balancing that with parish giving to the diocese is one of the prayerful tasks that churches like St Marys Barnes are called to. Because St Marys Barnes is one of 25 significant churches in the diocese steadily supporting other churches where there will never be a time that they can cover their costs, because for example the parish might be nearly all based in a very run down housing estate where people eke out a living .

I have ministered in one such parish, near Stockwell, a parish with the vast majority of the population live in a very poor housing estate and in an area of notable gun and knife crime. I try to go every other month. One of the wonderful features of this church is that it has as many as 35/40 young people coming each week, often without their parents. Why? The church provides a place where they can find sanctuary, respect, be encouraged,

To give you three examples of teenage boys there:

One young man now 19, who I have known for 9 years, called ‘Steven’, the effective father figure in a household of three younger sisters and his mum, he received several unconditional offers to go to University , but wanted to stay in London to take care of his family . When he was younger, he thought he would only reach 15 before dying, then when he reached 15, he thought it would be 18, now he is 19 he thinks he might make 21/23. Why? Because a black teenager on his estate consciously not involved in gangs is a target for those gangs.

Then when a few years ago I was assisting First Communion preparation class for 7/8 year olds we had lock down as police were looking for a gunman - none of the children were at all worried , they were interested in what sort of gun and whether the police were uniformed or under cover . When about twenty minutes later we were given the all clear, they just carried on with their first communion preparation as if nothing g had happened, it was all part of everyday life.

Final example, is a young man now 15 who when he was 9 wanted to play the piano ; I thought to give him one then realised I couldn’t get it up 3 storeys of a housing flat where there are no lifts - so we bought an electric one and he now has progressed to viola and plays in a top children’s orchestra. Churches like St Mary’s Barnes make it possible for the diocese to support ministry at a church like that, to pay for the priest there.

How much can we give? We need to be honest; we need to be generous but also grounded in proportionality.

My experience is that the more we give the more we receive as members of the body of Christ. The more we show love in our lives, sacrificial giving of our talents and skills to others, so we become the embodiment of what it is to have faith, a faith that can inspire others to venture into joining our community of faith.

One of the excerpts from one of my favourite poets, George Herbert, which I keep in my wall to remind me, is this

‘Enrich Lord, heart

Hands, mouth in me

With faith, with hope, with charity,

That I may run, rise and rest in thee’

As the Easter season draws to a close, and we look forward with that bittersweet excitement that it is is up to us, the Lord being our helper, to take the mission of the church forward. To do so we need to give and so we pray for each other that we may do so in a way that shows our faith, our hope and Gods generous love through us. And so, I very much hope that your stewardship campaign will bear much fruit for this church, for your community in and outside the church, and for those beyond who may never know you, but benefit from your generosity.

Amen.