

9th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

6th March 2011

A sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford
at the Baptism of Marilyn Evans during Parish Mass

*Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

ASB 1980

INTRODUCTION

By now many of you will know that, consequent to the announcement of my retirement, a meeting took place on Thursday night between the Church Council, the Archdeacon of West Ham, Fr. Elwin Cockett and our Area Dean, Fr. David Marshall.

BACKGROUND TO A PROPOSAL

The meeting was called to hear a proposal concerning the future of two of the town centre parishes – that is S. Edward's and ourselves. The background to the proposal concerns both the financial difficulties we are in and the reduction in full-time clergy that the Church of England faces. For this Deanery it means that, over the next few years, we have to lose one-third of our paid clergy. Already, with every vacancy, the diocese is looking at how to rationalise ministry and parish boundaries are being re-drawn. There have always been some churches, like the St. John's, Havering-atte-Bower, who are served by a priest with other responsibilities. Some, like the Ascension, Collier Row, now have a priest who, in exchange for living in the Vicarage, offers a few days work in the parish.

Inevitably, whenever I moved on, this question of what happens here would have arisen and these two options would have had to be faced. Whilst this situation is not entirely driven by financial constraints, it is true that we have not been able to pay our full quota over the past few years. Population-wise, we are also quite a small parish.

THE PROPOSAL

In light of all this there is a proposal that, upon my retirement, the role of Town Centre Chaplain should be added to this parish and that, in order to make this possible the Vicar of S. Edwards, Fr. David Anderson, should assume responsibility for us as Priest-in-Charge until a new appointment is made. You would, of course, continue to benefit from Suzanne's ministry for as long as she wishes, and is able, to serve here.

As this proposal is considered it is important to understand that no one is suggesting that we are 'swallowed up', absorbed or taken over by S. Edward's. What it means is that we are being asked to consider working in collaboration with another parish. The exact nature of that relationship has yet to be determined. It might mean a Team or Group Ministry, something I have long thought would be a sensible move.

COLLABORATIVE WORKING

Too often churches – and priests – can become congregational identifying with a building rather than the Body of Christ, the People of God. Rather than being focussed on Christ we become attached to a place. During my 25 years as a Franciscan I belonged to a congregation which located itself in many different communities.

One might develop an emotional or spiritual attachment to one place more than another but, as brothers and sisters, we gained our identity from realising we belonged to the whole congregation wherever it was located.

QUESTIONS

Now there are a number of questions that emerged during our meeting which I want to address this morning but let me assure you that there is no suggestion any of our buildings should close.

Worship. Firstly, some people are already wondering how this proposal might affect our 'services' and the answer is – it all depends on you. The problem with the word 'service' is that it is imprecise, which is why I avoid it. It's a generic term that covers the whole range of worship we offer – Morning and Evening Prayer, the Rosary, Meditation and so on. And, of course, the Mass.

Now it's only the latter that requires a priest. If you want to gather for a service, you can. For example, there was a period when Mass was not celebrated each week at S. Agnes but Evening Prayer was offered when there was no need for a priest. Since I came here I have encouraged you to share in the Daily Office (as happens in other churches) or lead the Rosary and so on. In the future you may need to take responsibility yourselves for these, if they are to continue, although the norm for Anglicans is that wherever the Mass is offered is where the congregation should gather..

Having said that let me also assure you that there is no suggestion of discontinuing anything. I have already spoken with the new Vicar of S. Edward's and he is keen to uphold our tradition. (In passing I would mention that he is a Priest Associate of the Holy House and has expressed a desire to join the Society of Catholic Priests). I have already agreed that we will be presiding and preaching at each others churches on May 8th.

Our tradition. Secondly, will this mean we lose our distinctive tradition? Well, what is that? When the PCC met I invited them to reflect on what they valued about our church and express their response in three words. As I listened it was interesting that the three things (and I will use four words) that emerged were: *catholic, welcoming and happy, and inclusive*. And those three things Fr. David values and would want to encourage should he become Priest-in-Charge.

The role of the priest. Thirdly, there was an anxiety that apart from Suzanne you would only have a part-time priest. The fact is, for the past nine years as your Rector I have spent a lot of my time with a large number of priests and laity in the ministry of Spiritual Direction and I hope this hasn't adversely affected the quality of the ministry I have offered you.

Whilst the proposal means the parish priest of S. Andrew's would, in future, have to spend time working in the town centre this has advantages as well as disadvantages. As one member of the PCC pointed out, he or she will be making relationships that might mean people would be drawn here! There is also an advantage in becoming part of a Group or Team because you would gain from the ministry of a wider number of clergy.

You would have a priest living at the Rectory, working within the context of this parish and the whole of Romford. Should the PCC agree to work with this proposal it would mean that Fr. David would need to make an appointment to this parish fairly quickly so any interregnum might be shorter than is normal.

Our relationship with S. Edward's. Lastly, the fear of being 'swallowed up' is natural. After all, we emerged from S. Edward's 149 years ago and there is a history of the way 'mother' has been perceived over those years. But, as another member of the PCC said, "We're strong enough to stand up for ourselves!" The way in which the churches would relate together would need to be worked out over time. It might be, for example, that both parishes kept their own Councils but had one overall, joint Council that met from time to time.

What is important to emphasise is that the distinctiveness of St. Andrew's is not jeopardised by these proposals. The future of your catholic, inclusive and welcoming heart depends entirely on you. After all, there would be no certainty that if you were not in this situation and were looking to appoint a new Rector, he or she might prove a disaster. There are people here who could vouch for that. And I know of a number of recent appointments elsewhere that have created deep problems.

There *can* be no certainty about the future. But you, not the priest, are the church and your commitment, your enthusiasm and your faith are what is needed to make sure this church remains catholic, inclusive and welcoming.

CONCLUSION

Whilst I do not want to influence the decision of the PCC I would say that, with the appointment of Fr. David to S. Edward's, a unique opportunity presents itself. Even if I had stayed for another year or two, financial and manpower issues would still be there and this window of opportunity presented by the desire to maintain a wider ministry in the town centre would have gone.

In the divine economy, this is a remarkable opportunity to make a step in faith.

'Lord, it is good for us to be here.' But we cannot remain on the mountain. Jesus did not allow Peter to build him a dwelling but, rather, invited him to continue journeying with him. We have this building, but we need to remember that it is not to a building we are called but to a relationship with a person – with God in Christ. *"Get up and do not be afraid". And when they looked up they saw no one except Jesus...'*

Almighty God,
in Christ you make all things new:
transform the poverty of our nature
by the riches of your grace,
and in the renewal of our lives
make known your heavenly glory;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*