

Dear all,

Ash Wednesday

This was a quiet and intimate service in the choir area for the service of the word and then we gathered around the altar for the Eucharist. Thank you to the Roman Catholic lady who left the donation for our church. Our thoughts were especially with one of our number who just learned that very day that he had lost his job and was having to return to the UK.

Last Sunday

was the **first Sunday of Lent**. Without repeating the sermon today, the great themes percolate down to re-evaluating our walk with God. Immediately after being baptised, the Spirit drove Jesus into the wilderness - a place where most of us feel we actually are spiritually on many a day. It is no shame to feel small and vulnerable and all at sea. I know it is hard to pray sometimes. All too often the words of Jesus we can most closely identify with are "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This sense of dislocation, anguish and doubt is not comfortable but it is not meant to break you. For anyone who takes their faith seriously these times are in fact a certainty. They are testing times, times of refining, in which we can emerge stronger and with a clearer sense of self and of God. Jesus' ministry did not start until he had heard the words at his baptism that said "You are my Son, the beloved" and then had that sense of sonship tested in the wilderness directly afterwards. No matter how messy you think your Christianity is, how hard you find prayer, how many objections you have found to having faith, Lent can be a good time for a **fresh start** and a time for **growth**. Don't be embarrassed. We all need help from time to time. Use Lent constructively to come closer to God and he will be right there with you, helping you to untie those spiritual knots. If you need help, ask someone - ask me - ask anyone. Just knowing that your problems and fears are shared and not unique to you can in itself be a huge load off your shoulders.

Warsaw calling

It was a pleasure to talk after the service to the churchwarden from the Anglican church in **Warsaw** who was in Bucharest on business. As churches facing the same challenges and difficulties we had much in common. If you remember, John Barker of course was in Warsaw before joining us here in Bucharest. Poland and Romania are the biggest countries in Eastern Europe who have joined the EU since 1989. The Warsaw chaplaincy has enjoyed good fortune recently when as part of state reparations they were awarded three apartments by the state. They have just sold one for £150,000 (I tried not to look too envious) so their financial future is more secure now than ever - chaplain's accommodation and a firm financial base!

Electoral roll

The electoral roll forms will be in church **all through March** until the AGM on the 29th March. You will need to be on the electoral roll if you wish to also then stand for the **church council** or as **church warden**. Those subsequent nomination forms will be available from me.

Germany calling

Whenever you list things or people you are always in danger of leaving somewhere out. After listing all those different countries that receive this email last week, I received an immediate reply from our webmaster in Nuremburg, Jo Kinberger which simply started ".....and Germany".

Thought for the week - Mind the Gap

I was reading the online edition of the International Herald Tribune and it reported something that it deemed a significant development - in that before the EU summit that has just taken place between all the countries of the EU, there was another mini-summit just beforehand, by invitation only, of all the newer Eastern European countries that have joined the EU more recently. The Tribune saw in that a sign of a deeper and long lasting division developing within Europe between the East and the West. To accentuate that line of thought the Hungarian leader has been speaking this very week about a new "iron curtain" descending across Europe based not on ideology, but a division based on wealth.

Divisions between East and West Europe are much older than recent political history. Going much further back, the division within Christianity between the Greek inspired East and Latin inspired West was apparent straight away, with tensions between the two cultures extending beyond theological differences, to what books could and could not be included in the Bible. In the best known example, the West insisted that the Revelation of John was included because they said it had been written by John the evangelist. The East, knowing that it had not been written by him wanted it out - the West prevailed. To this day, the Orthodox do not read from Revelation in their services.

The official split between East and West in 1054, which was about authority as much as the creed, only formalised a cultural division that had always existed. Religion, Christianity especially (because it is incarnate), is bound to take on the hue of the prevailing culture. The British experience over the past decade has shown us the truth of this. When Polish catholic workers migrated to the UK in large numbers recently they experienced a huge culture shock. English Roman Catholicism was quite unlike the Catholicism they were used to at home in Poland. Polish Catholicism was authoritarian rigid and conservative. English Catholicism was very open and liberal by comparison - just like their Anglican brothers in fact. The nature of two expressions of the same church in the same continent were radically different. *Note: When Anglicans fret over fissures opening up say between the USA and African expressions of Anglicanism it is a comfort that this is actually to be expected. It is the fear and acrimony that is so terrible.*

And in the Church Times a couple of weeks ago the editor the newspaper the "Independent", controversially accused the western and liberal converts to Russian Orthodoxy that attended a well known Orthodox church in London of caving in to extremist incomers and in fact of being pushed out of their own church by the waves of Russian immigrants unused to their liberal interpretation of Orthodoxy, and demanding a shift back to the authoritarian, rigid and conservative religion they were used to back in Moscow - which has in fact happened by all accounts.

Rudyard Kipling once wrote "East is east and west is west and never the twain shall meet" which talked of an encounter between an Afghan tribesman and the Son of a British colonel. I was reminded of this gap just this week when an Orthodox student doing a "Masters" in theology visited me wanting to talk about Anglicanism. We talked for an hour or so, but what became quickly apparent was the gulf in understanding. Everything from resurrection of the body taken literally (all western

Christians who are cremated cannot be resurrected apparently) to a belief in Adam and Eve as actual people, the Orthodox as the only one true church etc..etc....complete rigidity in all things. *On a passing note, did you know that if you die here you would not be allowed to be buried in an Orthodox cemetery?* One of my old tutors from college told me last year that in his experience, although obviously extremely bright and able, the students they get from the East, at first have very little capacity for, or experience of, critical and thoughtful engagement with theology. They were excellent at regurgitating "facts" parrot fashion, but seldom questioned them. Surely this must be a product of the environment in which Orthodoxy has developed? Centuries of oppression, under Ottoman Islam and communist dictatorship has engendered a fortress like fear and rigidity that was brilliant in enabling it to survive intact but perhaps not to develop theologically as the West has done.

Kipling's aforementioned poem, despite that opening line, is actually very positive though, and makes a very important point. It says, to my understanding that even though there are real differences, when we meet as equals and respect each other's common humanity and culture there is hope. This notion is valid for East and West Europe, Europe and Asia, Islam and Christianity, and Orthodoxy and the western catholic tradition of which Anglicanism is a part....and surely also between various warring factions within Anglicanism, in fact any division which we think is too wide to be bridged.

*Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, tho' they come from the
ends of the earth!*

The prayer for today is very short and has its roots in the Orthodox Hesychast (mystical and meditative) tradition that believes that through prayer and meditation - the inward journey - it is possible to see the uncreated light of God. It is short because it is meant to be repeated over and over, a bit like a Hindu mantra until it becomes a part of you. Used in this way each phrase and word can take on a life of its own as it is recited. It is now widely known and popular in the west and is the "Jesus prayer"

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, have mercy on me, a sinner

Love and peace

Martin