

Holy Trinity & St Peter South Wimbledon Sermons

Institution of Revd Chris Palmer as Team Rector of the Merton Priory team

By Chris Skilton

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The Bishop had identified a place ready for the next stage of its Christian life and mission. He had identified the person in whom he had confidence to undertake the task well. The man was duly commissioned and sent. There were some discouragements along the way; he returned to the Bishop who gave him a pep talk and sent him back again. And so in 597 AD, Augustine crossed to England and we remember and celebrate him in the church's calendar today.

Augustine was not as well prepared for his task as he might have been. Neither he nor any of his party knew any Anglo-Saxon, and they were given the rather lame advice to try and collect some interpreters in their journey through France. Gregory, the Bishop of Rome who sent Augustine, knew little about England. He expected Augustine to establish a church structure in England based on the Roman imperial system of administration (with sees in York and London), which no longer existed.

Let me assure you that Chris Palmer comes very well prepared and equipped to be Team Rector here. Chris has a first class degree in theology and has successfully completed a doctoral thesis on the theme of "Paul and Church Unity". He served his title in Warwick and then has been Team Vicar in the Mortlake and East Sheen Team and for four years, Area Dean of Richmond and Barnes. Chris has a passion for teaching the Christian faith and for sharing the fruit of biblical study, and has a reputation as an outstanding preacher and teacher. He is at home in leading formal liturgy and in exploring ways of engaging those as yet outside the Christian community in worship. Chris is proactive in pastoral visiting and committed to the engagement of the church with local schools. He is an enthusiastic advocate of Team Ministries and sees their potential for developing the ministry and mission of the church – in recent months he has been Acting Team Rector in Mortlake. Chris is a gifted musician and organist; he is a keen hill-walker and cyclist – he has already cycled virtually every road in the Holy Trinity Area and much of the St John Merton and Christ Church Colliers Wood areas of the benefice.

Chris comes knowing that there is important work to be done in developing the structures of the Team. The new Team was launched fourteen months ago and for one good reason or another you carelessly lost all your clergy in the first few months of its life. So now there is a new opportunity to work together and forge a new Team. It will be important to discover what it means to be a Team, working together for the mission of the church in South Wimbledon, Merton and Colliers Wood – developing and building common life, not for its own sake but for the life and ministry of the church here.

Augustine found more who embraced the Christian faith in south-east England than he expected to find. However he was met with some suspicion on his arrival. The King for instance insisted that when he met Augustine, they should meet under an oak tree. This would be a safer place to converse, he believed, in case the newcomer tried to use any foreign incantations, which would have been far more dangerous had they been in a building.

The people of the Merton Priory Team are welcoming a new Team Rector to lead the church in the next stage of its life and, as that work begins, there is an important early process of getting to know one another. It was said that after a short while Augustine was known in Canterbury for his sincerity, single-mindedness, and sense of fairness and justice. Chris comes to you known for his warmth and pastoral care; for his incisive

insights into church life – and the skill of chairing meetings effectively and holding together different perspectives and views. He comes with a life rooted in personal prayer and study, energised by the vision of all creation and humanity united by God in Christ.

There is something of this in our first reading this evening from I Thessalonians chapter 2. Paul writes of the importance of Christian character alongside capability and competence in ministry. ‘Who you are’ is important for priest, leader and people. The context of Paul’s writing arises from the fact that his ministry in Thessalonica was brief, ending in a public riot and legal charges, (the parish visit of applicants had not been an outstanding success). Paul was facing charges of being insincere, of being in it for the money, of running away. For Paul, the public ministry and the future of the church were at stake. Christian character and competence is at the heart of ministry and embraces authority and servanthood, not as a bemusing paradox but integral to the life of the people of God. For Chris and all who minister the lesson of Augustine is instructive – skill in ministry must go alongside godly character.

Augustine came with a clear message: according to the medieval historian the Venerable Bede, Augustine came proclaiming “how the compassionate Jesus had reclaimed a world of sin by his own agony and opened the Kingdom of heaven to all who would believe”. The church’s inclusive welcome has an edge to it and you must all seek under Chris’ leadership to ensure that that gospel is lived, shared and expressed with the people of this area and these communities. Augustine was clear about the task and vision before him – to build community in Canterbury to further the mission of the church. Would the church have spread in England if it had just relied on community – or would it have had integrity if it were not rooted in living relationships? Preaching the gospel is a demanding task, but not nearly as demanding as living out that gospel with those to whom it is preached. The life of the people of God is to be lived for the world and under Chris, this Team has the opportunity to model that life – for the good of this part of South London.

Such ministry is not undertaken alone. Gregory kept an eye on Augustine and wrote to the neighbouring bishop of Arles in France in these words; “if Augustine happens to visit you, I beg you to receive him with proper affection and kindness, so that he may be encouraged by your goodwill and that others may learn how brotherly love is cultivated.” There is a partnership to be cultivated both within the Team and beyond it – partnership that has already been an important feature of the Interregnum.

This gives me on behalf of bishop Richard and myself the opportunity to thank those who have contributed to the life of the Team during the Interregnum – firstly to Nigel Stone for all that he has given and continues to give, especially to St John’s and Christ Church; to the clergy of the Deanery and further afield who have taken services; to the Churchwardens especially and other lay leaders on whom a great deal has inevitably fallen; and to everyone who has played a part in sustaining ministry and mission here. One of the dangerous messages of this particular form of the Institution service is that taking Chris to the font, lectern and altar and giving him the symbols associated with those places might look like the congregation saying, ‘we’ve done our bit, now we’re giving you these to symbolise that it’s your turn for a bit’. Rather let the sharing of these symbols be seen as signifying a partnership together across the Team in ministry and mission.

Augustine made a significant difference to the life of the church in England – by his ability and through the strength and grace of his character. We’ll let Chris for the moment start with the Merton Priory Team – and Chris, we wish you well on this exciting day for you and for the Team. Amen