

The Spire

The magazine of St James's Church, Hampton Hill

Free, but a donation helps us!

February 2009



Out of Africa

Around South Africa in 18 days with the Hampton Hill XI

Info Board

ONLINE Check out the website for all the latest news

Welcome

FEBRUARY 2009



Regular readers of The Spire will have seen the magazine change considerably from an A5 booklet, printed by Norman and Sheila

Carter, to the A4 design produced in-house. Now we have gone full circle and have the magazine printed by Justin Hollingsworth, who very kindly and professionally prints magazines for charities at very reasonable prices. All the members of the Spire Committee work hard to produce a varied magazine, but we are hugely indebted to Nick Bagge and Prill Hinckley who design the pages.

Many friends who belong to other churches have to pay a subscription for their magazine, but we have always felt The Spire should be



available to all as part of our mission. Instead we have an appeal once a year so that people can contribute to our costs.

You will find a flyer inside this issue explaining more. In these uncertain financial times we hope you will still feel able to show your appreciation for our work.

Best wishes

Janet

Janet Nunn, Editor.

The Spire

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Magazine distribution

The Spire is available free from church. It is also posted or delivered to more than 600 homes. For more about this, contact Susan Horner (see above).

Contributions welcome

The Spire is your magazine and we welcome articles. We regret we cannot print fiction, poetry or anything subject to copyright. We can't promise to publish, so to avoid disappointment please contact the editor first.

Getting the magazine

Lost a copy of The Spire? The magazine has been online since 2006. It can be enlarged and is available on tape. For more information contact the editor.

Magazine appeal

££ If you have enjoyed reading The Spire please make a donation to help us cover the printing and distribution costs. Cheques should be made payable to 'St James's PCC' and sent to the Parish Office. Thank you.

Next issue/Copy deadline

The next issue of The Spire covers Lent and Mothering Sunday, and will be published on 1 March. All copy must be with us by Monday 9 February.

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Updates

Please tell us about any changes

Printing

Caring for the environment



Paper

Please recycle this magazine when you have finished with it.



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Product group from well-managed forests and other controlled sources.

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J A Hollingsworth 020 8686 4481

Services for February



Sundays

8am Holy Communion
9.30am Parish Communion

1 February

Candlemas

Presentation of Christ in the Temple

Malachi 3.1-5

Hebrews 2.14-18

Luke 2.22-40

8 February

3rd Sunday before Lent

Isaiah 40.21-31

1 Corinthians 9.16-23

Mark 1.29-39

15 February

2nd Sunday before Lent

Proverbs 8.1, 22-31

Colossians 1.15-20

John 1.1-14

22 February

Sunday next before Lent

2 Kings 2.1-12

2 Corinthians 4.3-6

Mark 9.2-9

25 February

Ash Wednesday

Isaiah 58.1-12

2 Corinthians 5.20b - 6.10

Matthew 6.1-6, 16-21

1st Sunday in month

1 February
9.30am All-age Communion

Mondays-Fridays (not Tuesdays)

9.15am Morning Prayer

Tuesdays

9.30am Holy Communion

1st Wednesday in month

4 February
7am Commuter Communion

1st Thursday in month

5 February
2pm Holy Communion

What's the connection between Jesus and Barack Obama?

PETER VANNOZZI

What do we really expect of people? I ask this writing at a time when the newspapers have printed their reviews of 2008.

The election of Barack Obama as President of the USA figured prominently as the highlight of the year. What do we expect of him? For some, there will be absurdly exaggerated hopes that seem to raise Obama to the heights, almost as a new messiah. Yet surely we know that he has feet of clay, simply because he is human, and that the expectations raised by his election will not be met. If even a little of what is hoped for is realised, that will be an achievement.

What do we really expect of people?

By contrast, as well as expecting too much of people, we can also expect too little. It has come as no surprise that another leader has not fulfilled any residual hopes about his behaviour. Robert Mugabe continues in office as someone who appears indifferent to the suffering of his people. His statement at the end of 2008 that 'Zimbabwe is mine' seems to be a supreme act of hubris.

'Hubris' is where someone overreaches themselves and almost makes divine claims. The only way to go is crashing down. The false idol a person has made of their own self ultimately collapses under the weight of its own folly. Even if it is simply that in the end the most controlling of dictators is shown to be human, dying of old age.

So what do we really expect of people?

February begins with a Christian festival, that of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple or 'Candlemas,' on 2 February. St. Luke records in chapter 2.22-40 of his gospel that the baby Jesus was taken by Mary and Joseph to the Temple. There he was acclaimed by Anna and Simeon, two devout people, well advanced in age.

As they celebrated Jesus as the light to the nations, many churches light candles on this day in celebration of that light. Some carry them in procession, others may light them for the Gospel

reading. The point is the same: here is Jesus presented in the Temple, the heart of Jewish religious life at that time, and there he is presented as light and glory for the world.

So what did people expect of him?

The hopes voiced at the point of his presentation in the Temple were visionary, rather than setting out a precise list of aspirations. Yet later on others would express their expectations of Jesus - earthly king, military leader, miracle worker, and so on.

A great deal of what people expected of Jesus was not to be fulfilled as he was not working to someone else's view of how he should be - how the chosen one of God should be. Any earthly leader bears the weight of our projections - how much more someone like Jesus. The expectation of earthly, material glory was not met by Jesus. Rather, he came to reveal a different kind of glory, God's glory. This glory is to be seen not in the number of armies that can be assembled or money that can be earned. This glory is seen not in the self-assertion of arrogance or the basking in the glare of celebrity. Rather, this glory is seen in every action that may just change life for the better for someone, and gives them hope of something more. To the extent that any leader gives hope in this way, they walk the way of Jesus, if only implicitly. This must be a hope for Barack Obama at the beginning of his presidency. It must also be the hope for Robert Mugabe at what must be the end of his presidency, as naive as that may seem.

So what do we really expect of people?

Here are Simeon's words in the Temple - this is what he expected of Jesus: Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace, your word has been fulfilled. My own eyes have seen the salvation which you have prepared in the sight of every people; A light to reveal you to the nations and the glory of your people Israel. *Luke 2.29-32*



IN THOUGHT AND PRAYER

Sophronius, Bishop of Jerusalem (d. AD 638), wrote some words about Candlemas, and exhorted people to welcome Christ as did Simeon and Anna in the Temple:

In honour of the divine mystery that we celebrate today, let us all hasten to meet Christ. Our lighted candles are a sign of the divine splendour of the one who comes to expel the dark shadows of evil and to make the whole universe radiant with the brilliance of his eternal light. Our candles also show how bright our souls should be when we go to meet Christ.

The Mother of God, the most pure Virgin, carried the true light in her arms and brought him to those who lay in darkness. We too should carry a light for all to see and reflect the radiance of the true light as we hasten to meet him.

The light has come and has shone upon a world enveloped in shadows; the Dayspring from on high has visited us and given light to those who lived in darkness. This, then, is our feast, and we join in procession with lighted candles to reveal the light that has shone upon us and the glory that is yet to come to us through him. So let us hasten all together to meet our God.

The true light has come, the light that enlightens every man who is born into this world. Let all of us, beloved, be enlightened and made radiant by this light. Let all of us share in its splendour, and be so filled with it that no one remains in the darkness. Let us be shining ourselves as we go together to meet and to receive with the aged Simeon the light whose brilliance is eternal. Rejoicing with Simeon, let us sing a hymn of thanksgiving to God, the Father of the light, who sent the true light to dispel the darkness and to give us all a share in his splendour.

Through Simeon's eyes we too have seen the salvation of God which he prepared for all the nations and revealed as the glory of the new Israel, which is ourselves. As Simeon was released from the bonds of this life when he had seen Christ, so we too were at once freed from our old state of sinfulness.

By faith we too embraced Christ, the salvation of God the Father, as he came to us from Bethlehem. Gentiles before, we have now become the people of God. Our eyes have seen God incarnate, and because we have seen him present among us and have mentally received him into our arms, we are called the new Israel. Never shall we forget this presence; every year we keep a feast in his honour.

Features

News Bulletin

A tribute to Sue Blay

Sue Blay will be remembered for many achievements, particularly in education and the Guides, but her husband John has asked for this tribute to focus on her Christianity.

The Revd John Carr, Rector of the Walesby Group of Parishes in Lincolnshire, is a family friend and had this to say at the funeral service:

Sue always had an opinion on things. On her last stay with us my wife, Liz, was discussing the merits of microwaving porridge to cook it. Sue announced to my daughter, Katie, 'There are three ways of making porridge, your dad's way, Liz's way and *my* way - which of course is the correct way!'

She had a childlike joy and happiness for life and she had a remarkable laugh - somewhere between a snort and a hoot, quite infectious. Although she was not childish, her feet were always firmly on the ground.

Sue was a devoted wife and mother, her joy was always in John, Katy and Clare and their love and support brought a rich contentment to her life. The funeral liturgy was shaped by Sue, John, Katy and Clare and the different strands of her life represented and acknowledged. She would have been so proud of her girls' courage in speaking such a beautiful eulogy to her.

Sue's life was shaped by love for her family and friends, and all humanity, and by a deep, authentic, living faith. The church at Walesby, in Lincolnshire, is on the Viking Way and, when Sue visited, we would often sit up there, saying Evening Prayer.

She lived her faith and had a very practical theology. Creation, and the beauty of nature, lifted her spirits,



spending time with John and the girls, all these things made Sue who she was and helped feed her spiritually.

This deep faith helped sustain her, through her many difficulties, with a bravery that humbled me and I am sure many others.

The essence of Sue's faith was to share her love of life with her family and friends and her ability to bring individuals to a better place through education, nurture and devotion. There were many facets to Sue's life. She was a vibrant, enthusiastic, intelligent, warm, spiritual person who faced each day as an adventure. Her encouragement and love for all humanity has changed many lives for the better.

Sue worked hard to maintain her friendships and shared her life with each of us. As we hold our own memories close, she now shares her final gift of faith, the Christian assurance that death is not the end.

The reading, 1 Corinthians 13.1-13, was also used on John and Sue's wedding day.

When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

Sue will be greatly missed.

Registers November and December

NOVEMBER
Baptisms

23 Henry Freddie Jones, Hampton Hill.

Funeral

26 Susan Ann Blay, 51, Hampton Hill.

DECEMBER
Baptisms

14 James Anthony Waring and George Thomas Waring, Hampton.

14 Kiera Emma Marie Dashwood, Feltham.

Around South Africa in 18 days

It all started when Gwynneth Lloyd, a South African by birth, asked Griselda Barrett if she was interested in going on a trip to South Africa. Word spread and, on 16 October 2008, ten members from St James's Church and a friend of Gwynneth, flew out of Heathrow on an 18-day trip.

By Clive and Ria Beaumont

Although many of the party had travelled the world, what was a first for all of us was that we covered 3,000 kilometres in a minibus, staying in twelve different places en route. As a result, most of us didn't bother about unpacking - we just lived out of our suitcases.

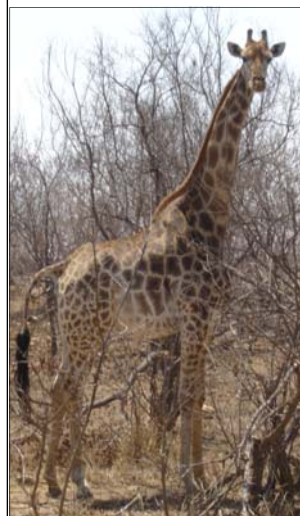
We flew to Johannesburg where we picked up a 16-seater Mercedes Sprinter, which was to be our home during daylight hours. We also met the two most important people on the trip and the two



who contributed so much to its success - Andrew, our guide (pictured, above left), a 24-year-old with a jaunty stride and a glint in his eye, and Sifiso (above, right), our wonderful Zulu driver who was born with a smile and a gentle manner.

The map shows our route from Johannesburg to Cape Town via Kruger National Park, the Natal Battlefields, the Drakensberg Mountains, Durban, Port Elizabeth, Tsitsikamma National Park, Knysna, Hermanus and Stellenbosch. How lucky we were!

Where do you start your story with a country so large and so beautiful? Let's start with the Kruger National Park.



The cat sat on the phone

It's roughly the size of Wales and is home to hundreds of thousands of animals, including the Big Five - lion, elephant, cape buffalo, rhino and leopard. We saw many elephants, buffalo and rhino and many giraffe, zebra, impala, kudu and warthog, but we saw just five lions, and a leopard - and he was on Park Ranger Lourens Botha's mobile phone! But it was no ordinary shot as the leopard was up a tree that was being shaken by an elephant who wanted, not the leopard, but the fruit from the tree.

There were sights that we will never forget - like the Verreaux's Giant Eagle Owl sitting just 10 feet up a tree, with her chick peering curiously over the top of the nest demanding to be photographed. There was the warthog enjoying his mud bath. And the four young male lions doing what they do best - sleeping!

But one of the most memorable sights, at least for us, involved a troop of rhinos. We were out one evening with Lourens when he spotted the rhinoceros.



oses. He reckoned that there was an adult female, a couple of other adults and up to three young rhino. They were clearly out for their regular evening stroll along their usual path which was due to take them across the tarmac road where we had stopped, cameras at the ready. The adult female signalled her troupe to wait: *'It's only the usual bunch of tourists wanting to ooh and aah over us - they won't be long!'* After the appropriate number of oohs and aahs and much clicking of camera shutters, Lourens reversed the vehicle and the adult female gave the OK to proceed. One of the young bucks positively scampered across the road as if to say: *'You humans have no right to interfere with our evening stroll!'* Bear a grudge - deny yourself a future!

Kruger National Park was obviously full of fun and interest, but one of our lasting memories from the trip will be the South African people themselves and by that we mean the black South Africans. Admittedly, our contact with them was relatively superficial, but we travelled through, and stopped in, parts of Soweto (pictured, right), which was far bigger and far more complex than we had imagined; we met the waiters, maids and cooks in the hotels and restaurants; we met people in the shops, large and

small, and we talked to taxi drivers in Johannesburg and Cape Town.

We also saw hundreds and hundreds of people going about their business - trading in the markets, chatting on street corners or walking to school - and the overriding impression was of a nation that was positive, hopeful and at relative peace with itself. The Mandela vision seemed to be in place and, in the words of Bongani Radebe, our Soweto Tourist Guide: *'You have to forgive otherwise the country won't stand a chance of developing ... and, if we bear a grudge, we deny ourselves a future!'*

St James's XI does as it's told

And talking of a group at peace, the St James's XI enjoyed plenty of banter and good spirit and plenty of good wine and red meat! For 18 days, we sat down together for breakfast, lunch and dinner, we travelled across half of South Africa together in our 16-seater Sprinter and, for two nights, we even shared ablutions!

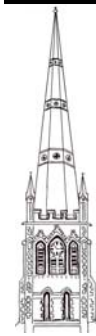
When told to get up at 5.30am we did so and, when given the option to go whale-watching at 6 in the morning, most of us went...and were well rewarded by the whales.

It was a truly amazing holiday in a truly stunning country - the beautiful Drakensberg Mountains, the wonderfully eccentric Table Mountain, the crashing waves in Tsitsikamma, the jacaranda trees, the Mozambique spitting cobras, the 140-year old crocodile, the Outeniqua Choo-Tjoe, the Apartheid Museum, the Zulu wedding ceremony, the young 'professor' who talked us through every minute of the Rorke's Drift battle, the lovely ladies in

khaki who escorted us to our rondavels in Natal, the superb brai (a South African barbecue) cooked by Gwynneth's cousin, Pete and his wife, Jean, the stylish hospitality of André and Brenda in Port Elizabeth and the home-cooking and brilliant organisation and teamwork of Andrew and Sifiso - all really marvellous memories!

N'gia bonga

On behalf of all who sailed in the St James's Mercedes Sprinter, we would like to say a very big n'gia bonga (Zulu for thank you) to Gwynneth for organising such a fantastic trip!



Around the Spire

News and events from Hampton Hill and beyond

'Engaging' vicar to be new Bishop

The new Bishop of Kensington will be the Revd. Canon Paul Williams, currently Vicar of Gerrards Cross with Fulmer, one of the largest churches in the Oxford Diocese. He is



pictured here with the Bishop of London, the Rt Revd Richard Chartres. Canon Paul has been highly effective in engaging new people in church life, particularly young people and families. He is married to Sarah, formerly a primary school teacher, and they have three boys aged nine, eight and five. Canon Paul will be consecrated as bishop by the Archbishop of Canterbury in St. Paul's Cathedral on Wednesday 25 March at 10.30am.

☐ We were pleased to welcome back an old friend... the clock has been repaired and is again chiming.

A birth, an engagement and a wedding...

Several members of our congregation have been celebrating happy events. **Pip and Anne Rowett have a fourth grandchild**, Alexander Michael, a first child for Andy and Mike.

Romilly Taylor, son of Rodney and Janet, has announced his engagement to Monique Bender.

The couple plan to marry in Cleveland, Ohio on 4 September 2009.



Duncan Robinson, son of Coryn and Ian and grandson of Hal and Ella, was married to Helen on 20 December near Inverness. The couple are pictured above right. And in the group picture there's a rare sighting of Hal in a kilt!

We send our congratulations and best wishes for the future to all these families.

☐ Our grateful thanks for the free gift of a baby grand piano to the church. It has a lovely sound and was much used and appreciated during the school carol concerts and performances before Christmas.

Got any news?

Please contact Susan Horner
tel 020 8979 9380 or email: smhorner5@yahoo.co.uk

Young Spire

With Prill Hinckley



ONLINE There's much more to read and do online! Young St James's has a guide to

Quiz - St. James's Chancel



The chancel is the eastern part of the church where the choir and clergy sit. It is separated from the nave by steps, a rail and an arch.

▪ Sort the words to show what is written on the arch:
WORSHIP US DOWN THE KNEEL
FALL AND O OUR BEFORE LORD
LET MAKER COME AND

.....

.....

▪ Answer the question:

- The stained glass window in the Chancel shows
(St. John the Evangelist, Mary, Jesus on the cross)

.....



- What letters are in the design of the chancel roof timbers?
- A and O (Alpha and Omega)
 - XP (the first two letters of the Greek word for Christ)



- Put a ring round the right words to make the sentences:

- The **organ** has many (*pipes, rods, spears*)
- It has (*two, four, three*) keyboards.
- The organist uses his (*hands, feet, arms*) to play the keyboards.
- The organist uses his (*hands, feet, arms*) to play the pedals.
- The 'stops' beside the keyboards (*are useful for hanging things on, make different instrument sounds, control the lights in the church*).



- Fill the gaps using the following words: (prayer, carved, clergy, backs, wood, chairs, Greek, entrance).



The **litany desks** are desks and the **sanctuary or bishop's chairs** are special chairs, both for the to use. They are all made of and are beautifully They now stand at the to the chancel. IHS is carved on the of the sanctuary IHS or IHC are the first three letters of the for Jesus (IHCOYC). There are three sanctuary chairs and two litany desks.



- Sort the letters to make the sentences:

Choir stalls are fixed seats in the chancel where the (IRHCO) and (CGLYER) can sit. They are made of (ODWO) and the stall ends are beautifully (EDCVRA). There are (WOT) stalls each side of the chancel. The sopranos and altos, (LFEAME) voices, sit one side while the tenors and basses, (LAME) voices sit the other side.

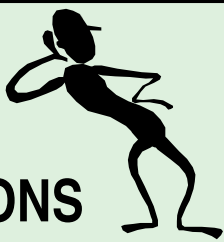


If you need help, go to the appropriate page on the Young St. James's section of the website.



What's On

REVELATIONS



Turbulent Priests

There is a long history of prophets and priests giving often unwelcome advice to secular rulers. Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dream was well received to everyone's benefit.

Elijah was not so fortunate with Ahab and Jezebel, but he proved his point in a rather entertaining manner, though Ahab doesn't seem to have been grateful for the show.

Henry II, incensed by Thomas à Becket, was instrumental in his murder, though he lived to regret it.

In 1997 the churches' book *Unemployment and the Future of Work* did not get the attention its careful scholarship deserved.

In the present stormy economic climate, Rowan Williams has suggested to our present leaders that encouraging debtors to spend more money is bad ethics if not bad sense.

Five other bishops have followed the archbishop's lead, voicing their own uneasiness with the policies.

History suggests that advice from prophets, who see a deeper truth than immediate expediency, is usually ignored, but usually right.

Keeping Small

Dr E F Schumacher's book *Small Is Beautiful* was published in 1973; there were 19 reprints over the next decade. Schumacher was an economist, successful businessman, lecturer, and writer.

He was one of the originators of intermediate technology, self-help applied science for needy communities.

He saw the international world of business and finance as a structure which had grown in such size and complexity that it was beyond the understanding, let alone the control, of any organisation or government.

He also saw its unfairness, inefficiency and potential fragility. Any upsets to its intricate and precarious structure could inflict enormous, unpredictable damage to local economies.

Schumacher, who died in 1977, would have been saddened but not surprised to see our present economic troubles.

However, he proposed a remedy. In brief, this was local self-sufficiency in essentials. For us, a programme building ecological-friendly energy independence might be a sensible beginning.

Reining in the Horsemen

In the books of Zechariah and Revelations the visionaries see four dreadful horsemen, generally regarded as representing the disasters of war, famine, pestilence and death.

Today it doesn't take a visionary to add climate change to the four. But today we are much better equipped in scientific and technical skill. We could tame all five horsemen if we have the vision and the will to do so.

Our bombs and other weapons are their allies. But diverting money from the endless construction of new weapons, putting it into research and investment in agriculture, medicine and the environment is an opportunity for real defence against these deadliest of terrorists.

Candelmas Evensong

Sunday 1 February, 6pm, *Candlemas Evensong*, St James' Church, Hampton Hill. Concordia will be singing.

St James's Theatre Club

Thursday 12 February, 7.45pm, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, Richmond Theatre. A glorious romp. Tickets £15 (save £12).

Tuesday 24 March, 7.15pm, *The Tempest*, Richmond Theatre. Starring Antony Sher. Tickets £17 (save £10).

Wednesday 8 April, 7.45pm, *Brief Encounter*, Richmond Theatre.

The iconic film comes to the stage. Direct from the West End. Tickets £16 (save £10)

Tuesday 5 May, 7.45pm, *Cabaret*, Richmond Theatre.

Starring Wayne Sleep and the runner-up from BBC One's *I'd Do Anything*, Samantha Barks. Tickets £19.50 (save £10).

To join us, please put your name on the church notice board or telephone Ria Beaumont on 020 8943 4336. Transport can be arranged.

Shrove Tuesday Parish Meal

Tuesday 24 February at 7pm.

A chance to celebrate together before the start of Lent at the Piazza Firenze restaurant in Hampton Hill High Street. Two courses, plus a glass of wine for £15 per adult, £5 for under 10s. Meat dishes extra.

If you would like to join us, please add your name to the list in the South aisle of the church or call Liz Wilmot on 020 8977 9434 or email: elizabethwilmot@talktalk.net

Ash Wednesday

25 February at 8pm.

Parish Communion.

Ecumenical Lent Groups

Look out for details in the next issue of *The Spire*.

Fairtrade Fortnight

23 February - 8 March

Can you help to MAKE IT HAPPEN by promoting the use of Fairtrade products where you work? Catherine Gash (020 8783 0563) or Ann Peterken (020 8891 5862) will be pleased to help you.

Walsingham Pilgrimage

Tuesday 17 - Friday 20 March, Walsingham Shrine, Norfolk.

Organised by the Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage Trust with the support of the Ecumenical Society of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius and The Catholic League.

Devotions, talks and liturgies at the Catholic National Shrine, the Anglican Shrine, St Mary's Parish Church, the Methodist Church and the Orthodox Church of St Seraphim, in the village. Speakers include: Bishop George Stack, Archdiocese of Westminster; Rt Revd Peter Forster, Bishop of Chester; Revd Dr Colin Thompson, St Catherine's College, Oxford and Revd Sandy Williams, Wesley College, Bristol.

Full board accommodation is at the Anglican Shrine. Further details and booking form from the Revd Peter Marr, The Ecumenical Marian Pilgrimage Trust, 31 Kingsley Road, Plymouth PL4 6QP or by email: at pbmarr@dircon.co.uk.

New Bishop of Kensington's Consecration

Wednesday, 25 March, 10.30am, St Paul's Cathedral, London.

The Revd Canon Paul Gavin Williams, 40, joins us from the Oxford Diocese, where he has led one of its largest churches, St James, Gerrards Cross with Fulmer, in Buckinghamshire, since 1999. See *Around the Spire* on Page five.

Concordia Concerts

Sunday 5 April, 6.30pm,

Palm Sunday Concert, St John the Divine, Richmond.

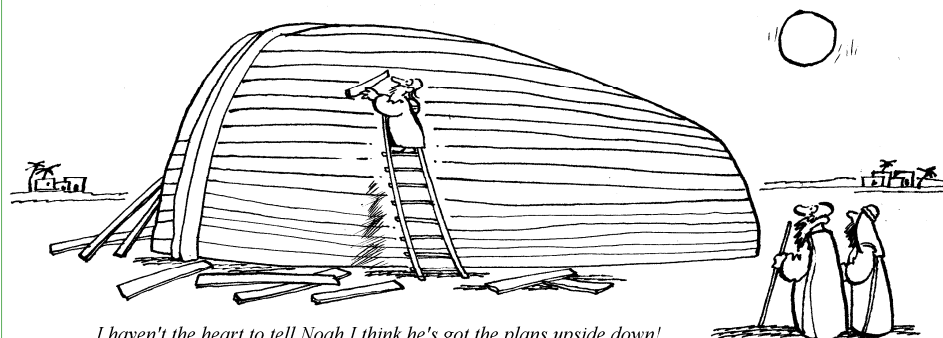
Concordia Voices perform *Membra Jesu nostri* and *Buxtehude*. Musical Director Neil Ferris. Organist Alex Chaplin. Tickets £12 (concessions £10).

Sunday 28 June, 7.45pm,

With a Merry Noise, St John's Church, Wimbledon.

Programme to include Walton's *The Twelve* and the first concert performance of Paul Spicer's *Psalm 150*. Tickets £12 (concessions £10).

Vicar's View



... I haven't the heart to tell Noah I think he's got the plans upside down!

Your Voice

Lesley Mortimer

Our Church

Why I'm so passionate about giving everyone the right to university



“What did you say you do?” “I’m a Widening Participation Officer at Brunel University.” “A what?” How many times have I heard that response over the past six years!

I am funded by money given to all universities in England to motivate and change the aspirations and expectations of specific groups of people who have traditionally had little contact with the world of higher education (HE). These are largely young people who might not otherwise view studying at university as an option or may be discouraged by social, cultural, economic or institutional barriers.

I am absolutely passionate about my job. Why? Because I believe it is a scandal that from nursery school age onwards a child’s socio-economic background affects its educational achievement. The statistics published in a 2008 National Council for Educational Excellence report are frightening:

- In 2003 42% of 16 year-olds obtained 5 GCSEs A*-C, including English and Maths - the pre-requisite for success at higher levels of study. Of these 57% were from the three highest socio-economic groups. Just 16% were eligible for free school meals (an accepted indicator of deprivation).
- Only 10% of the poorest fifth of families get a degree by the age of 23, compared to 44% of the richest fifth.

- Around 60,000 pupils in the top 20% during their school career to the age of 16 fail to go on to HE.

For the young people involved in this catalogue of failure it is a personal tragedy, thwarted from pursuing their education by factors usually beyond their control. But it is also a tragedy for society. We know that graduates engage more fully in community life and lead healthier lifestyles. More significantly we urgently need more people with graduate-level skills for our future economic well-being. But as important for me, it is a Gospel imperative to ensure that every individual is given the opportunity to use their God-given talents and gifts to the full for their own and others’ benefit.

So how do I spend my time at Brunel? I organise HE awareness-raising visits to the campus for young people from primary school upwards. I run Taster Days enabling pupils to learn more about degree subjects. There are Summer Schools for Year 9

pupils in Hillingdon, study skills and critical thinking sessions, GCSE revision classes and Careers Fairs geared to sport and the health professions. All the participants have to meet certain criteria, such as having little or no family history of HE, and be in receipt of free school meals or educational maintenance allowance. They may be disabled or ‘looked after’ by the local authority - two groups hugely under-represented in HE.

If younger pupils can be persuaded to stay on at school and gain A levels or the equivalent, social background no longer makes a difference. Once at university they have the same chance of success as their more privileged peers. For older pupils it is a matter of opening their eyes to the opportunities if they have a degree-level qualification.

In all my widening participation activities I am supported by a pool of Widening Participation Student Ambassadors. These are undergraduates who themselves come from non-traditional backgrounds and have achieved university entry despite the odds. They are absolutely crucial to the success of our programme. When they speak to visiting pupils of growing up on a sink housing estate, of attending schools where violence is a daily occurrence or of having been excluded from school, the young people sit up and take notice.

The Government’s commitment to widening participation in HE - a target of 50% of 18-30 year-olds by 2010 - has received considerable criticism. How often do we hear the cry ‘we need plumbers and electricians, not more graduates!’ Perhaps, but not at the expense of denying so many of our country’s young people the chance of bettering themselves by going to university. It is a matter of justice - and we know God’s take on justice!

When people from the most disadvantaged backgrounds visit a university, experience the excitement of academic learning and meet others like themselves who are already enjoying the benefits, they are often moved. If that response can be harnessed we can perhaps put a stop to the terrible waste of talent and to the many lives spent knowing they should have amounted to much more.

If you’d like to comment on something please email the editor: janunnhh@btinternet.com



The Baptistry windows behind the font depict the scene of Jesus being presented in the Temple.

The centre window has the infant Jesus being carried by his mother, Mary. The left window has Simeon, a devout old man who acclaims Jesus as light and glory. The right hand window has a similarly devout person, Anna, who likewise greets Jesus. This event is remembered in the Christian year on 2 February or the Sunday closest. It is found in Luke 2.22-40 in the bible.

In the north aisle is a window depicting the Blessed Virgin Mary as the ‘Mater Dolorosa’ or ‘Mother of Sorrows.’ When Jesus was presented in the Temple, Simeon said to Mary: ‘A sword shall pierce your own soul, too.’

This was a pointer towards Jesus’s crucifixion. Mary’s pose and her dark clothing points towards her mourning her son.

