



The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

Homily for Saint Bartholomew (24th August) 2024

Those of you, who read the stuff I send out, will know that Saint Bartholomew's, Tong is all that remains of a collegiate foundation established at the beginning of the fifteenth century. Hanging in the tower is the Great Bell of Tong: weighing in at over two tons, it is one of the largest bells in the country and far too heavy for the tower.

It was cast in 1518, less than two decades before the College was dissolved at the Reformation, the gift of Sir Henry Vernon. So the story goes, returning home, he had got hopelessly lost in the forest; but hearing the bells ringing from the church, he followed their sound and was enabled to find his way back to his home nearby. The bell was a gift to mark his gratitude.

The role of the bells in the story falls into two parts. In the first place they speak out into the darkness; and secondly, having made their connexion with Sir Henry, they guide him home and to safety. In this, we can identify also the Apostolic work begun by Saint Bartholomew and the other eleven and which continues to this day.

In the first place, we, as Saint John would describe us, the people who have seen the Great Light, call out to those who still walk in darkness. This we do in various ways. We proclaim the Faith in presenting it to the world and, as Saint Paul would say, in the celebration of the Eucharist. We also go out into the world to meet people where they are; and by works of charity in its more profound sense, manifest God's love for the world He has made.

Secondly, we seek to guide people home - to their true home within the household of Faith, preparing them to return to their true native land with God. Sometimes, we call to them to walk towards us; in other circumstances, we go out and walk with them.

One of the problems with much modern day mission is that we do much of part one, but the latter part is often lacking. The reasons for this are various, I am sure. One, perhaps, is that if in going out to meet people where they are we seek funding, the cash comes with constraints on the degree to which we can advertise our Christian commitment and motivation. There is also the important consideration that we should not attach conditions to the charity we undertake. Sometimes, we have to accept that, as was doubtless the case for the bells of Tong College - maybe much of the time - we shall call out into a dark emptiness.

Never-the-less, we should not forget that the work will only continue whilst there is a Christian community behind it: and one, which is secure in Faith. We might remember that in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles, Saint Barnabas and his eleven associates quickly came to confine themselves to the task of preaching and teaching, leaving the charitable aspects of Christian community life to Saint Stephen and his colleagues. This they had to do, since the capacity of the Church to respond to need relied on there being a steady influx of members: people who were sufficiently formed by the Gospel that they would readily contribute to these charitable undertakings.

Mission, therefore, cannot just be taken "out there." It requires ensuring that what goes on "in here" is properly maintained and developed and, most of all, that there is traffic from the mission in the world to the daily life of the Church.