

SERMON – 23 JUNE 2019, 5 pm

So on Thursday 24 June 1819 the Lord Bishop of St Asaph consecrated this church. I quote from the Derby Mercury, “The Bishop took his place on the North side of the altar ... a preamble was then read, setting forth the purposes for which the building was erected – that it was to be guarded from all profane uses and devoted to the worship and service of Almighty God – the rights and privileges to be enjoyed – the subjection of its ministers to the regular episcopal authorities – the investment of the rights of patronage in the family of Walter Evans, Esquire, the founder, and the building was accordingly consecrated in a very solemn manner by the Bishop to holy purposes. ... The regular morning service was then performed ... and an appropriate and eloquent sermon was preached by the Reverend C.S. Hope, Vicar of St Alkmund (the mother church) from the text Isaiah 2, verses 2 and 3.

In days to come

the mountain of the LORD’s house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.

Many peoples shall come and say,
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.’

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.

Apparently it was the Bishop of St Asaph as the Bishop of Lichfield (we were in Lichfield diocese in those days) was indisposed - +Jan and I wondered if he was a bit miffed at being told he had to consecrate a church on Walter Evans birthday, and had a diplomatic cold

I hope that Walter Evans and his family had a sense of pride in what they had achieved – and that the events strengthened their faith. It is worth reminding ourselves that whenever we come into this church, high above the font is the memorial to Arthur Evans, son of Walter and Elizabeth. It’s the memorial with the little lad on top. Arthur would have been 19 in 1819, and presumably was here on that special day. He died two years later at the age of 21. The memorial says that he had, and I quote “been a partaker of Christ sufferings through a life of various sicknesses, trials, and troubles” – I don’t know what his illness was, but to loose your only son at the age of 21, must surely have shaken the faith of Walter and Elizabeth. I wonder if sometimes Walter sat in this church, feeling

angry that he has built a house for God, and yet his son had gone to God far too young. Yes, I do sympathise with him. Life is not fair.

Spare a thought, too, for the Reverend Thomas Sanders, the first Curate to serve here – in his six years he officiated at 63 burials, but I suspect the funeral of Arthur Evans was the hardest he had to do. I hope Thomas was able to support Walter and Elizabeth in their grief. As a church community over 200 years we have supported many people through their darkest hours.

I am glad that Thomas also had the pleasure of officiating at 119 baptisms – that's 20 a year. No birth control in those days! (We didn't have any weddings until this became a proper parish church in 1847). As a church community over 200 years we have rejoiced with many people.

The world has changed – but people haven't changed that much. No doubt on Sunday 27 June 1819, the first Sunday of this church, some people were very pleased they didn't have to walk to St Alkmund's or St Edmund's – and no doubt others were just as unenthusiastic about going to St Matthew's as they had been about going to St Alkmund's or St Edmund's the previous week. But if you wanted to be in work on Monday, you needed to be in church on Sunday – so you went.

200 years later, we don't have to go, we have many alternatives – we have to decide how we prioritise our lives. Paul reminds the Galatians that they are not ruled by Law, no longer subject to a disciplinarian – they are men and women of faith. And as men and women of faith, we have freedom. We have freedom to worship, we have freedom to love – and in our freedom we should walk with Christ. It is not easy being men and women of faith in the 21st century when so many tell us God is irrelevant. It is not easy being men and women involved in a church community in the 21st century, when there are so many other demands on us. It is not easy being men and women involved in a village community in the 21st century, when so many people in the village seem to think community isn't worth making any effort for and the church is an irrelevance that can safely be ignored.

But we know that Christ matters to us, that faith is real, and that God is using us in prayer, in worship, in service, in love and care and friendship. Life may have changed – I do wonder if the Bishop of St Asaph would have approved of young ladies tap-dancing in his church yesterday afternoon (or would that have been classed as profane?). Life may have changed, but God remains worthy of our worship – and his love still needs to be shared. Amen.