

St Marylebone Choral Evensong 23rd July 2017

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts always be pleasing in thy sight O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

On the 5th February this year we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the consecration of this present church building and today we give thanks to God for 900 years of Christian witness in what was to become St Marylebone, the “great city north of Oxford Street”.

The first parish church, established sometime in the early 12th century, was dedicated to St John the Evangelist and was erected to be the parish church of the ancient Manors of Tyburn and Lillestone; it stood on what is now Oxford Street, on a site near Stratford Place – quite possibly under the basement of Debenhams! Which has to me, has always seemed rather an odd place to put a parish church!

By 1400, St John's had fallen into disrepair and was demolished and a new parish church, St Mary of Tybourne was built just 50 yards or so away from here in a much more salubrious location, far away from the gallows of Tyburn.

In 1740, a new parish church was built on the same site and there it is that one of the founders of Methodism, Charles Wesley, along with other members of his family, still lies buried. That was the parish church painted by Hogarth in the ‘Marriage of the Rake’ in his ‘Rake’s Progress’ cycle and which was infamous throughout the land for the willingness of its clergy to conduct rather shady marriages.

Throughout the eighteenth century, chapels of ease and

propriety chapels were planted - and flourished - throughout the enormous parochial area that had become known as St Marylebone in the early fifteenth century.

New parishes such as All Souls', Langham Place, Christ Church, Cosway Street and St Mary's, Bryanston Square were carved out of the St Marylebone mega-parish and these parishes were followed by many nineteenth century church plantings, the majority of which still serve the people of St Marylebone today.

Thomas Hardwick's monumental parish church, in which we sit today, was erected on the site of yet another planned chapel of ease and, at the time of its building, Hardwick's parish church was the most expensive parish church ever erected, although its rather austere preaching box Georgian theatre interior soon went out of fashion and under the auspices of Mr and Mrs Gladstone, then living in Harley Street, the parish church assumed its present appearance and came because of Thomas Harris' interior decorative scheme of the mid 1880's soon became known as *God's Drawing Room*.

A lot of history – and quite a number of church buildings – for one parish. But the history of this place shows that church life and community life never stand still and calls forth new expressions in every generation.

By the late 1970s, it was evident that St Marylebone needed to reinvent itself yet again to serve better the people of its parish living in a context very different from that of the rural hamlet of 1200, the pretty country village of 1400 or the grand streets, squares and boulevards of 1800.

And so it was, that Christopher Hamel-Cook, a priest of energy and vision, oversaw the exhumation of the greatest and grandest of Marylebone's nineteenth century residents in order to make way for an innovative NHS GP practice, the St Marylebone Healing and Counselling Centre and a host of allied operations which brought together care for the body, mind and spirit – not to mention the collaboration with the Royal Academy of Music which produced the great Rieger organ of 1987.

The life of a parish church doesn't stand still and today we are well into the development phase of the St Marylebone *Changing Lives* Project which will see the Crypt transformed to become a community and heritage hub fit for the twenty first century – and beyond; a place where the people of Marylebone can meet and share stories, find wholeness and healing through the ongoing work of the Healing and Counselling Centre and the Marylebone Health Centre; a place where the women of the Church Army's Marylebone Project can provide hospitality and welcome and where the God who has revealed Godself to us as Father, Son and Spirit can be worshipped – for if a parish church is not first and foremost about the daily worship of almighty God - as well as being a place which serves its community - it does not deserve the name 'parish church'.

The parish churches of Marylebone have, through the centuries, discovered that they can and do change the lives of those who come to them. Here we seek to help people not only to glimpse the beauty of God through worship and music on Sundays, but to find wholeness and healing through our schools, our chaplaincies to universities and hospitals, our work with people living with dementia, the work of all that goes on in the crypt Monday to Saturday.

God's work in the world, as lived in Jesus and now lived in us, his Body, is to transform people and places, to change lives, and as this parish church community goes boldly into another century and we take up the challenge of proclaiming the Good News of God's welcoming and accepting love through Word and Sacrament, Fellowship and Prayer why not join us in the task of Changing Lives; worship with us; work with us; rejoice and celebrate with us.

God does not need buildings made of stone, let alone a glorious drawing room in Marylebone, but God does need us to be the living stones who form his Temple.

Back in February, the Associate Archdeacon of the Two Cities reminded us of the words of the priest poet Trevor Dennis who wrote that God does not need royal palaces *for*:

how then could Bedouin shepherds dare bring [him] angels' songs and sing him their lullaby? How [then] could [he] sleep in a fisherman's boat/ Embrace a madman among the tombs?

All that God requires is for us his children to share our stories with him through the night and see that night turn to day; for us to share with others the extraordinary intimacy of God's love which interweaves the life of the world.

May the people of Marylebone, the people of all ages whom we seek to serve continue to find God here, may they share their stories with him and may their lives be touched and changed.

Amen.

The Revd Canon Dr Stephen Evans, Rector of St Marylebone