

CONSECRATION SUNDAY 2019 **Hatchment & Baptism**

Someone once wrote “A people without knowledge of past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots”. And in our very mobile and transitory society, more and more people are interested in their roots to give them identity and help them to understand who they are. Not only history channels and magazines but programmes like ‘Who do think you are’ are among the most popular. There is a U3A family history group who meet in our hall. Family history has become quite an industry. In our baptism register Bea who will be baptised shortly will have her name recorded along with her parents, their occupations and her godparents – I wonder if any of Bea’s descendants in years to come will want to view the register.

There is a piece of history literally looking at us this morning. And it’s even older than this church building. It’s the royal coat of arms of Queen Anne. She was on the throne from 1702 to 1714, a few decades before this church was built in 1746.

The original St. Peter’s Church was not here but beside the sea, near where St. Luke’s church has since been built. The original St Peter’s church was destroyed in a storm in 1739. Which was a blessing in disguise as it was felt that the church was too far from the village and apparently wasn’t in good repair. A report says it was so “ruinous and deranged” that services couldn’t be held in it.

It was decided to build a new church, further inland and opposite a pub – which the Old Vicarage used to be. Our present church was consecrated on 19th July 1747.

Only a few items were salvaged from the old church – the sun dial outside (though the top is a recent addition), the churchwardens chest which is in the Formby Chapel and the hatchment, or coat of arms which has been restored thanks to the generosity of a donor.

Rather appropriately, the stones from the old church were used for foundation stones for the new church, and they are still visible.

In a real sense, the new St. Peter’s was built on the foundation of the old St. Peter’s. A rather big and ancient font was left behind and can be seen in the porch of St. Luke’s. Maybe when their vicar, Harvie, moves to Manchester Diocese it could be his parting gift to return it!

Royal coats of arms appeared in churches during the reign of Henry VIII to underline that he had made himself head of the Church in place of the Pope with whom he had fallen out. As you will read in the next Parish Magazine many Tudor and Stuart coats of arms were destroyed by Cromwell’s soldiers, but with the Restoration of the Established Church under Elizabeth 1, it became the practice to display hatchments again.

And as you can see churchwardens may come and go but we will not forget the names of those in 1710.

The Queen Anne hatchment is a reminder of our past history and a service of baptism is also a reminder of our roots as Christians.

Baptism goes right back to the days of Jesus, who himself was baptised by John, and ever since new members of the church have undergone baptism as they joined the church. At the end of his ministry Jesus told his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations and baptise them.

A baptism service is a re-call to fundamentals.

The explanation of baptism on the inside cover of our booklet reminds us, baptism is the first step in responding to God's love.

The very foundation of our faith – is that God loves us, God reaches out to us, that God calls us to himself.

People often associate Christianity with negativity – that we're obsessed by sin and guilt.

But nothing could be further from the truth. The foundation of our faith is God's love for us.

Like the original church down near the beach, we may be "ruinous and deranged", but God still loves us, as Cromwell said, "warts and all".

That love has been offered to everyone entering the doors of this church over the past 272 years – to everyone baptised here and I would hazard a guess that is at least 7000 in this church's history.

And how can we be sure of God's love?

Well, our epistle today opened with some of the most important words in the whole of the Bible – "Jesus is the visible image of the invisible God."

In other words, if you want to know what God is really like, look at Jesus. In the memorable phrase of Martyn Percy, Dean of Christ Church, Oxford, "Jesus is the body language of God."

Jesus' ministry was one of love, acceptance and compassion, not just in words but also in action.

And so great, so inexhaustible was his love for us that he went all the way to the cross, to show that not even death could weaken his love – then, now and for all eternity.

And that is why, in baptism, as well as water to signify a new start, we will sign Bea with the sign of the cross. To show that she is loved by God and always will be.

And that is why, as we sung in our opening hymn, the cross has central place in our church – a visible sign of God's love reaching out to us, inviting us to follow Jesus and become his disciples.

As the coat of arms reminds us of St. Peter's earlier roots as a parish, so the cross reminds us of the foundation of our faith – God's love for us as shown in Jesus.

In our Gospel today we heard of Martha and Mary's reaction when Jesus visited their home. Luke tells us that Martha "was distracted by her many tasks".

Mary was sitting at Jesus' feet listening to what he was saying.

While the church as the Body of Christ has to be active and doing there are times when we need to be recalled to the basics of why we are here.

And the coincidence of Consecration Sunday and a baptism does just that.

God invites us and wants us to be members of his family, the church, that he wants us to know his presence and his love, and has given the cross as a symbol of his reaching out.

God wants us to continue to welcome in those who come for baptism – as we welcome Bea this morning – praying that this church may help her know God's love, that it will give her a foundation in faith that wherever life takes her – whatever adventures she gets up to she may always be aware of God's love giving her strength and joy.

We thank God for this church's history, going back to Queen Anne and before, proclaiming the good news of God's love and being intimately involved in the lives of countless people here in Formby.

We give thanks for the past, rejoice in the present and look forward to the future in hope and faith.

With that in mind I call Bea's parents and godparents around the font.