

**A Service of Thanksgiving and Remembrance to commemorate the
70th Anniversary of St Anne's Church in Soho.**

**Sermon by the Revd David Gilmore.
Rector of St Anne with St Thomas and St Peter.**

It is a great Privilege to welcome here to our service today, The Right Worshipful The Lord Mayor of Westminster, Cllr Judith Warner. We pray for your Consort's swift recovery and send our best wishes to him.

It is also an honour to welcome the German Ambassador to the Court of St James Mr Georg Boomgaarden and Mrs Boomgaarden.

And finally to welcome Fr Anthony Hurst who will be launching a book written by him about St Anne's Church and Soho.

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In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy
Spirit. Amen

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Imagine we are back in 1940 and it is a few days after the 24th September when the beautiful St Anne's Church had been destroyed. How would we feel? Maybe anger, disappointment, or resolve to keep going and rebuild to its former glory. There might have been a mix of so many thoughts and feelings even down to asking where was God and why us? Why did God protect the Catholics' St Patrick's Church and allow St Anne's, part of the Established Church, to suffer such damage?

I try to put myself into my predecessor's shoes and I really don't know how I would have coped. Maybe it was that you had to! There might have been relief that no one died, coupled with the horror knowing that sacred vessels of the church had been looted. Such a mix of emotions and yet, organisation was needed to locate a place for worship as Holy Communion needed to be celebrated in the parish, and in times of crisis people needed the church.

Who really knows what thoughts and feelings were present 70 years ago, but one fact was clear to all, the

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wonderful Wren building ceased to be and all that was left was a shell and the tower. More damage was caused by a further air raid two weeks later and then in 1941, more of lower dean street was again bombed and the remaining structure further damaged.

TS Elliott, in the exert from Little Giddings, refers to endings and beginnings. It is clear that the end of the Old building of St Anne's was also a beginning no matter how painful it had been and there had to be a dying and a rebirth. The destruction of the old building was also starting point of where the new phase had to happen from.

Amid questions of – what now? There was no instant answer and the dream of the new build took a further 50 years to be realised. Instant answers were not given and there was indeed a pile of stones for many to gaze at. But what did we do with those stones and where was God in all of this?

The Book of Joshua paints a picture of a wandering nomadic group, the children of Israel, who have left

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Egypt in search of the Promised Land. 40 years it has taken them to get there as God has led them away from tyranny to a land flowing with Milk and Honey, and whilst they move on in faith, too soon they forget the God who provided for them along the journey and at times they wander in circles. They resent God and turn against their leaders and many times they test God. But now the end of the journey is close and they have just crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land and are about to take possession of it – God tells them in chapter 1, “every place you put your foot I have given you”, but in order to claim the promise you must go forward. There is no point in standing still, there must be a moving forward –that is what faith is – it is going forward but holding tightly to God no matter where he leads us.

Once again they cross a river. The last river they crossed in fear with the Egyptians gaining ground. They feared for their lives but God was with them. On this present journey there might be feelings of sadness intermixed with joy as Moses their great deliverer is

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dead in the land they have left behind them. But there is also hope and expectancy ahead of them. The past is past and now for the present. But once they cross the river Jordan and are firmly on the soil of the Promised Land, rather than an immediate advancement to go forward and find their dwelling, God gets them to think and look back. He instructs them to build an altar of 12 simple stones (one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel). The people are forced to think of where they have been but also where they are going to. Moses the Great Leader is dead, the past is gone and it won't come back. You can't live on past memories and broken dreams and as they move forward they must claim the promise. A memorial is made – and they are encouraged “when your children ask ‘what do these stones meant to you?’..... then you shall tell them.... for the Lord God dried up the waters of the Jordan and so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty.” Don't be frightened to talk about it and to learn.

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I wonder what the stones of St Anne's mean to us – is it that which points to a God who is faithful and who keeps his promise or do we worship a building and a past? In a changing world is our world still in 1940? If it is the latter then, we fail to look back and see a God who is faithful and who in spite of everything has kept this church here from 1686 but ever changing.

So often we talk about the Church as a building – but the word Church means so much more than a pile of bricks and mortar. The Church is the people of God and the mission of the Church is to show God's love into the community around. So whilst the building was destroyed, the church in Soho never was destroyed. The people continued to meet, initially at St Thomas regent Street and then in the Allen Room. Jesus tells his disciples that his church is a church which cannot be destroyed and it is a misnomer to say that St Anne's Church was destroyed in the war. The building was but the faith remained.

Today's service is not about wishing ourselves back to the glory days of this church. The past is gone. Nor

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today are we remembering the war and like those WWII films portraying the enemy as evil, rather we recognise that at times of war man's inhumanity to man comes to the fore. Our task is to strive to seek the way of peace in our nations and in this world in order that the way of war will be forgotten. We must also remember that churches, homes and lives were destroyed in Germany and beyond and so much pain was caused to the innocent there as well as here. We should remember and pray for the souls of all who died.

This service is a reminder for us all to look back and to give thanks to God, before we can move forward on the next part of our journey and our calling as the Parish Church in Soho. It is right to give God thanks for the bad as well as the good and it is from the painful things in life that we learn so much. Anniversaries have a purpose and we are called by God on this anniversary to take stock and having paused for a little while to move on with strength.

So 70 years on – where are we now? Is the past gone and are we moving forward or is there still a bit of

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desert walking to do? And if we are to build an altar with the pile of stones from the old St Anne's what will be its purpose? Is it about holding on to the past or moving on to the present and the future? Is it about us or about God? Is it about seeking our own purpose or holding our hand out to God for his leading. New beginnings are times of fear but also hope. In faith new beginnings can be so exciting. There was fear back in 1940 and maybe as we take a look back before moving on – the poem by Minnie Louise Haskins, which King George VI read on his Christmas message to the British People at the beginning of the Second World War, will bring us hope and courage and assist us on our journey.

**I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year
'Give me a light that I may tread safely into the
unknown.'**

**And he replied, 'Go into the darkness and put your
hand into the hand of God
That shall be to you better than light and safer than
a known way!'**

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**So I went forth and finding the Hand of God
Trode gladly into the night
He led me towards the hills
And the breaking of day in the lone east.**

**So heart be still!
What need our human life to know
If God hath comprehension?**

**In all the dizzy strife of things
Both high and low,
God hideth his intention."**

Maybe as we build the altar of Stones today from the rubble – we need to build into it the things that Jesus speaks about in the reading from St Matthew's Gospel. He shows us what true kingdom values are.

God calls his church, the people of God to be different, to be beautiful and to show this to the world. To be salt and light. We are called not to stand still but to be ever going forward. Look at the things that we are told to seek, Mercy, meekness, hungering for righteousness, purity of heart and to be peacemakers. It would be so

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easy to think about the war in terms of winning and losing, but all the nations of the world lost during the Second World War, because the war to end all wars and the lives of those so freely given had been in vain. As we look back today, we need to hear God's voice telling us to be men and women of peace. To seek and to pray for the peace of the world and to encourage our children to ask why this is so important.

Maybe the lesson that St Anne's can testify to, is that, out of the ashes and dust and ruin a much greater thing is planned. Hope and reconciliation, are before us as we look at the cross and the candlesticks upon the altar – we see our link with the people of Germany and the beautiful gift this church received at its rededication. There is no point looking forward but standing still. We need to move forward in our calling by God.

Christ on the cross who prays for those who persecute torture and kill him and calls his followers to pray for all.

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In closing St Francis of Assisi was praying in front of the crucifix in the ruined and derelict church of St Damian. The figure of Jesus on that crucifix suddenly called out to him “Francis, rebuild my church!” St. Francis initially thought the Lord was asking him to repair the dilapidated Church of St. Damian. So he started repairing the Church and finished the job. Only Later did St. Francis know that he had misinterpreted the Lord and that the Lord had another rebuilding project in mind. St. Francis of Assisi was being called to rebuild the Church as a whole. He was being called to rebuild the entire household of God. How did St. Francis rebuild the Church? He helped bring the Church back to her foundations so that the Church could be rebuilt stone by stone on the foundation of Christ. Jesus Christ himself is the foundation of the Church, the cornerstone. And the Church is the spiritual house built of living stones on this foundation and on no other no matter how good or celebrated they might be. These living stones are those who build their life on Christ,

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So the question is what do you want to rebuild here? A building or the house of God? And as we move from our brief pause and backward glance, maybe as we build, it will be as Elliott says:

**We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.**

**And all shall be well and
All manner of thing shall be well**

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen