

June 2018

The Rector writes:

‘A NEW BISHOP’



At the beginning of July, I will be able to enjoy a new experience, as I attend the Consecration of the new Bishop of Tonbridge. Simon is presently preparing for this momentous event, and for his task as he focuses on evangelism and growth in the diocese. The role of a Bishop is complex and busy as the following extract from the Diocesan website on what a Bishop does reveals:

‘Bishops minister to a large number of people publicly and privately, in local, national and even international contexts. Bishops are responsible not only for specific services such as ordinations, institutions, confirmations etc, but also for ensuring appropriate worship takes place within the diocese. Bishops have pastoral care of all the people in their diocese and, especially of the clergy. The local aspect of the work involves spending a great deal of time and effort in the wider community. This means maintaining relationships with the civic authorities, participating in the development of plans for local communities, supporting local initiatives, working in a huge range of areas from conflict resolution in neighbourhoods to international development. Bishops help to relate the local Church to the wider Church. This means participation in national bodies and their work, including the House of Bishops and General Synod. Quite often, too, bishops take the lead in the work of the Church’s voluntary organisations. Bishops have a responsibility for promoting unity between Christians. There is also a responsibility to promote understanding and good relationships among people of different faiths. Again, this can have a local, national and international dimension’.

Being a Bishop is not easy, as our own St Martin discovered when in AD 371 he was acclaimed bishop of Tours, where he impressed the city with his demeanour. He had been drawn to Tours by a ruse — he was urged to come to minister to someone sick — and was brought to the church, where he reluctantly allowed himself to be consecrated bishop. According to one version, he was so unwilling to be made bishop that he hid in a barn full of geese, but their cackling at his intrusion gave him away to the crowd; that may account for complaints by a few that his appearance was too dishevelled to be commensurate with a bishopric, but the critics were hugely outnumbered.

Sulpicius Severus (Martin’s biographer) affirms that Martin withdrew from the city to live in Marmoutier, the monastery he founded, which faces Tours from the opposite shore of the Loire. "Here Martin and some of the monks who followed him built cells of wood; others lived in caves dug out of the rock". Martin introduced a rudimentary parish system. Once a year he visited each of his parishes.

Martin continued to set up monastic communities, and extended the bounds of his episcopate. As bishop, he set to enthusiastically ordering the destruction of pagan temples, altars and sculptures. In one instance, the pagans agreed to fell their sacred fir tree, if Martin would stand directly in its path. He did so, and it miraculously missed him.

Martin was so dedicated to the freeing of prisoners that when authorities, even emperors, heard he was coming, they refused to see him because they knew he would request mercy for someone and they would be unable to refuse.

So you can see that the role of a Bishop, far from being the promotion to high office within the church, is a difficult and at times dangerous occupation. We should give thanks for the great example of St Martin, and also pray for strength for Bishop elect Simon, that he may be strengthened in his new role as Bishop of Tonbridge

Yours in Christ,

Reverend John, your Rector.