

It's the end of an era, and a new one starts tomorrow! And the words of the writer to the Hebrews are just as bright now as they were when they were written. Keep on loving each other as brothers: as Christians. The love being talked about is that love which binds brethren in the church together.

I believe that the Christian people at St Andrew's Church have been quite good at that over the last year and a bit since Steve James left us, and I am encouraged by that. But you'd have to be honest and say that while it's been good, it hasn't been perfect. I remember the tongue-in-cheek advice I was given a long time ago: if you find a perfect church... don't join it!

But I find encouragement in the words of verse 1 in another way: because the love of brothers isn't perfect. I can see that when I look at my sons. Their love for each other isn't perfect, but it is, nevertheless, a deep and enduring love.

And in verse 2, we have an instruction to entertain strangers. If we do this, there is a great blessing from it, but a problem too. You have to keep on doing it, because the people who started out as strangers will become friends. As you offer friendship and hospitality to strangers, they will become friends. One way or another, isn't that how friendship begins?

And then we have the striking line "for by so doing, some people have entertained angels without knowing it." How many angels have sat down at your dining table?

Anyway, tomorrow evening, we welcome Philip as the new Rector of Bebington, and we will also welcome Caroline and the rest of his family too.

It will be a celebration, just as much as a big party, as we

celebrate the arrival of the man we trust that God has put in place to be our leader. In fact, it **will** be a big party: not just in the service, but afterwards in the Hall. All sorts of people from Bebington and outside Bebington will be there, and they will be celebrating the future of Bebington Parish just as much as people celebrate at a wedding.

And that's a striking image here too: in verse 4 we read "Marriage should be honoured by all" while the next phrase "the marriage bed kept pure" means "husbands and wives must be faithful to each other".

There are so many things that are modelled by the picture of marriage: the most famous, of course, is the picture of Jesus as the bridegroom and the Church as the bride.

At Keswick this year, while he was leading worship, Steve James said he has never seen a groom who didn't want to see his bride coming down the aisle. And on so many of the occasions he must have been thinking about, this must have been the very aisle.

And although it was before his time here, twenty years ago this month, I was one of the bridegrooms he was talking about, though it was Geoff Turner who will have seen me look to see Viv walking up the aisle.

It's not a wedding tomorrow, but it is a new beginning: the start of a new partnership blessed by God: one that will also involve loyalty, trust, faithfulness, prayer and senses of both humour and determination.

Be content with what you have, because God has said "never will I leave you, never will I forsake you." I had a look at the book of Deuteronomy to see a context for that verse. It comes from the story of Joshua succeeding Moses as leader. "Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of your enemies, for the Lord

your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.”

Instead, we speak with confidence:

“The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”

There are so many promises like this in scripture: if God is with us, who can be against us? I will never leave you or forsake you...

I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Now, to lead a successful Christian life, you need to properly equipped. This means that we need to know what God's word is saying to us: a knowledge of the word of God as it is revealed in the Bible is key to growing as a Christian. As St Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians, no-one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If anyone builds on this foundation, his work will be shown for what it is. It will be tested by fire, and the fire will reveal the quality of each man's work.

But in the last verse of the passage, verse 7, we read “remember your leaders”, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

The solid grounding in scripture is something we need to do for ourselves, with God's help, but our leaders and teachers will certainly help us. As I think back more than thirty years since I came to know Christ, I must be honest to say that most of the teaching I heard, I have forgotten. But some of the people who have taught and preached, who have been strangers or friends, have offered thoughts and insights that have been helpful to me over so many

years.

My parents were not church people, and after I was saved, some of my world-view was still that from my parents. Nevertheless, my understanding that the Bible was the word of God undoubtedly simplified some discussions with one teacher. Over and over again, I would put forward some view, and be countered with "But God says..." and a few verses to illustrate my error. By God's grace, I **did** accept the authority of scripture: I just didn't yet know what it said.

Thinking back, I can think of many people who have taught me, instructed me, corrected me in the Christian faith. Some of them have finished their time on this earth; some of them are still with us but are living thousands of miles away, and some of them are here with us this morning. [Note. Check to see that some of them really are here.]

I'm not going to name any of these people at the moment, but I do want to tell people that they should not take the teaching they receive at St Andrew's Church, week by week, for granted. You will hear the message of salvation through Jesus Christ taught more faithfully here than at many, many churches. You will hear practical applications of Christian truth more often here than you will at many, many churches. And you will hear more about the great things God has done in the world than in many, many churches.

And some of you will still complain, though many do not. I long to take you to some of the churches where I have heard sermons that make angels weep, so that you can understand the great treasure we have here.

I haven't heard Philip preach, but I am sure that I will have plenty of opportunity over the coming weeks and years!

And I am sure that he will be well able to do what God has called him to do here. In my time here, I remember Bill Persson, Geoff Turner and Steve James. I remember being at Geoff Turner's institution service, as this mysterious stranger was presented to us as our new Rector. What would he be like? In just the same way, though with a lot more years and a lot more pounds, I look forward with the same eager anticipation as we wait to see how God will use his servant Philip.

But as I finish, let's go back to verse 1: keep on loving each other as brothers. Our wardens and our other leaders have been asking us to do this over the last fifteen months, as we have been waiting for our new Rector. Now, as he arrives, let us **carry on** loving each other as Christian brothers and sisters, as we celebrate the new era, but as we remember the promise in verse 8: Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever.