

Parishes/family

By Father Michael Lovell

The area? Surbiton is located within the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and is eleven miles from Charing Cross, a mere twenty minutes away by fast train to Waterloo.

We are between the two shopping centres of Kingston and Surbiton. An impressive variety of shops are available, including the bigger chains and the big four banks. As well as a theatre and cinema there are a variety of restaurants. Those beside the river offer a special atmosphere and ambience. As you cross the road from the church door, there is the River Thames. At the moment the trees have Spring buds and swans glide gracefully near the walkway. Not far from us is Kingston University. The parish has always provided its Catholic chaplains.

Catholic population? The last published Mass attendance figure for the parish was 552.

Local Catholic schools? Our parish primary school is St Joseph's by the Fairfield, a fifteen-minute walk from the church. Originally the Tiffin Boys' School, it was purchased for the parish by Dr Herbert Calnan, the first diocesan parish priest. The building provides a fine space for the children.

Parish groups? The parish community supports the church in every way. We have a fine choir and organist to support our Sunday liturgy. Catechists are in place for sacramental instruction. A husband and wife lead the RCIA programme which gives it a nice balance.

The hall is full of life after Sunday Masses, with freshly prepared cake and lively chat. There is a small men's group, about half a dozen in number who meet regularly for prayer, discussion and refreshments.

Our monthly "Theology on Tap" talks look into our faith with a range of speakers carefully chosen, allowing time for questions. In Lent there is always a project to help needy causes and a number of activities in the parish to add to funds. I am RC Chaplain to the University of Kingston and Catholic faith advisor which links the parish with our Catholic students and university events.

History of the church? Our parish church is beautiful. It was designed by the architect Charles Parker and built in 1846 by Alexander Raphael, an Armenian Catholic. Called St Raphael's after the archangel, the building was completed in 1848.

A Grade II* Listed building, it is the finest example of Victorian Italianate architecture in England.

An extensive restoration project was completed in 2012 when Fr Vincent Flynn was parish priest. The Bath stone of the exterior was cleaned and the landmark cross at the top of the bell tower was gilded in gold. The eye is drawn to the tower and the cross from either side of the river. The clock, which chimes the hour, was made in 1770.

Inside the church, the repainted original decorations delight the eye. People kneel for Holy Communion at the cast iron altar rail, also gilded and with a firm mahogany arm rest.

The stained glass windows, of Armenian design, have also been restored. The Stations of the Cross were painted in 2011 and now have modern lighting which is subtle and atmospheric. A new parish centre was constructed along with accommodation in the grounds of the church.

Unusual facts? Alexander Raphael made a promise to Our Lady that if he recovered from a serious illness, he would build a church in the grounds of his home. He did so, but died shortly after its completion in 1850. He is buried in the vault beneath the High Altar with other members of his family, and Canon Bernard Grady of our diocese, who died in 1992.

A local joke has it that if you stand long enough in St Raphael's, you'll turn to gold!

Background of parish clergy? I was ordained by St John Paul II and have been parish priest in three other parishes before Surbiton. I spent a few years working closely with the late Bishop Charles Henderson in the diocesan Christian Unity Commission.

Our deacon Peter Sebastian has been involved in St Raphael's for over thirty years. He is now at Wonersh on a two-year course of studies for priesthood. Fr Julian Shurgold is also resident and supplies for us as well as lecturing in Church history at Wonersh.

My parish:
St Raphael,
Surbiton



Faith isn't always easy

By Lucy Russell

God has a plan. And, as Mother Teresa said, He will only task you with what he knows you can cope with. Those are words that are easily written, read and said. It isn't always as easy to believe them in our hearts.

Someone I know whose faith was strong has stopped coming to Mass.

with three days teaching a week (plus time planning and marking) is leaving me frankly exhausted.

I am struggling and although teaching food technology is wonderful, it wasn't an ambition and I'm not sure quite how I ended up here, or whether it is really part of God's plan at all.

On that basis, just before Christmas I applied for an advisory

students need you."

What could I say to that? I have a wonderful friend who emailed me after I had let her know the results of my interview, "I love God, but he can be a real pain," she said.

"Sometimes I'd love to know what he has in store so that we could discuss the matter. Unfortunately, some of his ideas are also his best-kept secrets!"

be part of God's plan, to make us suffer?"

It's such a hard question. That God's own son asked his father that God wasn't just a good person was a great teacher and is God himself. How could it be part of a divine plan that He should be tortured and crucified?

The Gospel of St Matthew tells us that Jesus was overcome with