

APCM 11 October 2020. Vicar's Report

In usual times I would be both looking back and looking forward at the APCM, setting out the priorities for the coming year. The world which we inhabit has changed dramatically. The reports presented to this meeting for the year of activity 2019 seem to come from an entirely different world. I want to extend my thanks to everyone who has played their part in the life of the church in the past year. In particular thanks are due to Liz White, James Westgate and Richard Ely who have stepped down from their roles on the PCC. James and Sheila have this year reflected on their pattern of life, and have resigned as LWLs, and we are grateful to them for the many ways they have enriched our worshipping life. I am grateful to John Alexander for his dedicated work as an LPA, but he too, has made the decision to relinquish his role. Particular thanks are also due to Lorraine and the Ministry Team for maintaining pastoral care and the worshipping life of the church with me.

So while we can look back, and follow all the necessary requirements for the functioning of the parish in legal and administrative terms, even trying to imagine the future, let alone try and set out a roadmap for the coming year, is incredibly difficult. I cannot even tell you for certain how we are going to celebrate Christmas. The only certainty is that we are living with uncertainty.

So what do I say to you as your Vicar? None of us could have imagined at the beginning of 2020 what the year was going to bring, which is probably a good thing. I remember that terrible feeling of dread through the first weeks of March, and receiving the first of many many guidance documents regarding keeping everyone safe in church. It felt like a rock on my chest as I wrestled with how best to love and serve you as well as dealing with my own fears. The day the lockdown was announced I came into this church building, lit a candle, prayed and wept.

And then we adapted, we had to work out how to do church differently. And so we did – developing from small podcasts and paper based services to the livestream services we are able to do today. We have been blessed by those who have given generously of time and resources to enable this to happen. As the body of Christ we have endeavoured to look after each other and stay connected in different ways. We marked Holy Week, Easter and Pentecost differently, but our worshipping life has been maintained. For me everything we do starts from this point, from being together in worship, however we make that possible: it is through our worshipping life that we are connected to God, to each other and inspired to take that life out into the community by the way we serve others. It is this that keeps the church alive – not the structures, or the buildings or the finances even – **we** are the church.

Technology is a blessing, but it is no substitute for the face to face, the embodied contact of sight and sound and touch. That is what Jesus' ministry is all about – being fully present to people. And it is how I attempt to shape my own ministry among you. It still pains me that we cannot fully share in bread and wine, neither can we see each other's faces properly, nor can we offer a handshake or a hug. But we refrain from all of these things as an act of love towards each other as we seek to keep each other well and safe. We may be socially distancing, but we need not be spiritually distancing.

We face continuing challenges – as individuals with our own burdens, in our church, in our nation. We cannot be complacent about our financial situation, as Alan has outlined for us just now. We are facing a long and difficult winter, where more people may be missing from church – how do we stay connected and care for them? We may face more bereavements as church family members are getting older and frailer, quite apart from the threat of Covid-19.

I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to members of the Standing Committee – to Lindsay, Marjorie, Meg and Alan, as well as to Steve for all the tech support during these months. The Standing Committee have met pretty much weekly as we have negotiated guidance documents, prepared to reopen the church and the church centre, and thought about how we plan for the future. I could not have done this without your unstinting commitment and support, and St Michael's owes each of you a great deal. Thank you so very much, each of you. And thank you to everyone who has continued in your own commitment, expressed in so many ways, both seen and unseen. Your faithfulness encourages me.

As I reflect on what may lie ahead, I find myself returning to a phrase that I have preached on recently and which has not left me. Facing reality with hope. We do that with the help of the narrative which is the foundation of our faith – the story of Good Friday, Holy Saturday and Easter. We walk through the grief of Good Friday, the emptiness of Holy Saturday, the tentative joy of Easter day. Grief and emptiness exhaustion and hope have been played out in my heart pretty much on repeat during these rollercoaster months of 2020. I brought the Easter candle in on 23 August as a symbol of the rekindling of hope as we resumed worship in church. This was and remains an act of faith. We do not yet know what will be beyond the present, but we do know that we will not be overwhelmed and overcome. It was not unalloyed joy that day because we are still not all together, but it is a step in the right direction.

When I was crafting the liturgy we currently follow it was a deliberate choice of mine to use the words that I repeat now to conclude these remarks. I hold on to them and

encourage us all to hold fast, and to trust that though times are uncertain, everything is held in God.

So now we leave this space of worship
And while so much of the road ahead is uncertain,
the path constantly changing,
we know some things that are as solid and sure
as the ground beneath our feet,
and the sky above our heads.
We know God is love.
We know Christ's light endures.
We know the Holy Spirit is with us,
found in the space between all things,
closer to us than our next breath,
binding us to each other,
until we meet again,
Go in peace.

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God bless and keep you all.

Suzanne