

Vicar's Report to the Annual Parish Meeting

I was looking at the Diocesan web site the other day at the draft specification for a new Bishop to replace Bishop David, after he retires in July (not may I add, with thoughts of applying, but I was curious about what a new Bishop will be expected to do). It begins with a statement of the Diocese's vision for change.

- To leave our places of safety and follow the God who goes before us and is already at work in ways we have not yet dreamed of
- To discern what God is doing to make all things new and to draw others to recognise and celebrate his transforming presence among us
- To make church where God chooses, not where we choose, and to pitch the tent where God is at work, and open it to all, celebrating God's life-changing love active among us.

Three key strategies have been determined to achieve these purposes

- To adopt as the underlying themes of our work the five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion
- To commit to be a learning and teaching Church for all Believers
- To work with a vision of developing a body of ministers, lay and ordained, stipended and voluntary, parish based and engaged in fresh expressions of church, and deployed in response to the mission and ministry needs of our whole communities.

The five marks of mission of the Anglican Communion referred to are as follows:

- To proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom
To teach, baptise and nurture new believers
To respond to human need by loving service
To seek to transform unjust structures of society
To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth

It set me wondering how we, as a parish, live up to that kind of vision – indeed whether we have even begun to develop a feel for such a vision over the last few years. I wondered what we will say to the new Bishop, if when he visits the parish, he asks us how we have and continue to contribute to the vision of the Diocese which he has been asked to implement.

I reflected on these things because last year I reported that as our building work came to an end, we need to turn outwards again. I meant by that that we need to become much more open to the wider world, and develop new ways of mission and ministry, developing our work in the wider community and thinking through the issues that confront us as Christians in the next decade. As I have reflected on these things in the past 12 months, I have realised that we need a vision larger than ourselves to shape our thinking about the future, and the changes we need to bring about. I am well aware of how busy many members of our congregation are

–many of you are – in maintaining and supporting the institution of the Church – witness the work reported on in this meeting!. Our buildings are in excellent order, our worship is good, we bring many non-Church members onto the site and into our buildings, we provide many memorable experiences for a diversity of people, and by and large enjoy ourselves in the process. But the truth of the matter is that so often it feels and looks like a treadmill of activity with few tangible results to show for the effort, in terms of the Kingdom of God i.e. transforming the world's structures, making new believers and helping those who live in darkness to move into the light.

True our outside giving has increased considerably. True we make facilities available to those who need them and they are grateful to us for it. But where are the results in the shape of new believers, offering loving service to those in need and transforming the unjust structures of society. That is not to deny that many individual members of our congregation are involved day by day and week by week in many loving acts of service. But that is different to what we as a community ought to be doing. For me as the Vicar of Colehill, the challenge is, I suppose, to harness our corporate energy so that we can engage more directly in mission and ministry and less in maintenance of our buildings and in the structures of the institution. But that also requires imagination and insight in identifying the ways in which we can do these things.

We do not start from scratch, of course. We had the pilgrimage to the Holy Land last spring, and although that only involved a small number, it brought insight, experience and understanding of a much wider world to those who went, which is always invaluable. The pilgrimage this year is to Salisbury Cathedral, and will bring different insights and for many more people, for a world larger than our own. Where should we be planning to go to next year I wonder? A pilgrimage as an annual feature of our Christian life might help to reinforce powerfully that we are called to be a pilgrim people, always on the move together in search of the place to where God is calling us to place our tent. Tents are impermanent structures – about movement and change and response to where we are on the journey.

Two years ago our Christmas programme was a new initiative in order to make links with the community. It has been a success and now feels like an established feature. This year we have developed that by turning the Christmas Tree into a cross for Lent, and using it to place a placard reminding the world of major Christian themes and seasons. How can the zeal for evangelism revealed in that idea be developed and built upon, I wonder?

We have recently been brave enough to bring the 11.15am service to an end because it has outlived its purpose and usefulness. But that makes available a block of time that we could perhaps begin to plan to use more productively. What about holding an Autumn course on Sunday mornings following the Parish Eucharist? The American Episcopal church finds nothing odd in expecting its members to attend adult Sunday School in addition to Sunday worship. Two services every Sunday morning, and two tracks of teaching, with breakfast in between. Perhaps we ought to do the same since everyone is too busy during the week to find the time to attend courses, groups, training for ministry and mission etc.

And how should we be offering loving service to the community? Perhaps we should be offering, as a congregation, a weekly lunch which offers people the chance to come in and meet one another, with no strings attached. Perhaps we should be making more efforts as Church to create the church Centre as a meeting place where people can meet one another without having to belong to a club or an organisation. Providing a cold lunch is not difficult.

Rolls, packets of crisps, fruit, chocolate biscuits and tea and coffee are easy to produce – I speak from experience since I did it twice a week for a year in the chaplaincy when I was at University.

The biggest challenges we face, in the coming few years, are the challenges all congregations face. How do we engage with the gospel, those who have no knowledge or experience of Church? How do we improve our pastoral care? How do we become a more confident group of Christians aware of our own vocation to exercise the ministry of Christ, unashamedly, and with enthusiasm and a real sense of zeal for the kingdom of God? And how do we address the needs and questions of seekers and enquirers in a spirit of openness, rather than with the somewhat closed responses and demands that many Christian traditions impose on those who ask a question of faith or of ethics?.

None of this should detract from what we do and the achievements we attain. We do some good things together of which we ought to be proud. The Sunday School continues to meet the needs of our young people in an imaginative and thoughtful way. The choir continues to provide a solid background for our liturgy under the capable direction of Jenny and new young people are joining although we could still do with one or two more adults too. We have had one or two really interesting study courses, although it is noticeable that the same few always sign up and there are rarely any new names on the list! We had some memorable social events through the year again, and thanks are due to all who have laboured so hard to make these a success.

Thank you to everyone who contributes to our common life in far more ways than I have mentioned.. There are many who work very hard indeed, much of it unseen and unacknowledged. But without that contribution, we should be very much the poorer.

As we turn to another year, we are challenged to look well beyond our boundaries, well beyond what is routine and comfortable, well beyond the known and expected. God calls us ever onward, as the Diocesan vision says, to where he is already at work in ways we have not yet dreamed of and to make church where God chooses, not where we choose, to set up our tent to where God is, rather than in the place where we are comfortable and familiar. The fact is that tents are temporary and insecure. That is a daunting but exciting challenge to us all for the future.

JWG
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