**The Vicar’s Address to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting**

**11 October 2020.**

By force of circumstance, and yet by happy chance, our Annual Parochial Church Meeting falls into a ‘Season of Gratitude’. Last week, at Harvest, we gave thanks to God for his provision of our daily needs, our life, our health, our food; and later this autumn we give thanks for the Holy Saints of God, our own departed loved ones and those who gave their lives for our freedom. So, in this season of gratitude I want to express my gratitude both to God as well as to *everyone* in our church family who have played a huge part in the life of St Paul’s over these past eighteen months. And I do mean *everyone*, even though as we look back there are those to whom I am sure, we will all wish to show particular appreciation.

**Clergy**

Following the PCC’s decision to welcome women priests at the altar two years ago, I am delighted that the Reverend Sister Hazel Smith has finally been able to exercise her priestly ministry at St Paul’s, where she is much loved and has served over several decades, and I am pleased that she accepted my invitation to become an Honorary Assistant Priest here. I was also delighted to extend the same invitation to the Reverend Canon Michael Bradley, lately Vicar of Flitwick. I am grateful to them both as I am sure you are, for their kindness, friendship, experience, wise counsel, pastoral care and support, not least during my recent absence due to eye surgery. The Reverends Jennie Cappleman, Sarah Burrow and David Powell have also provided much needed help at some weekday Eucharists and I thank them.

**Worship**

Worship of God continues to be our first priority. The ministries of bellringers, flower arrangers, lesson readers, intercessors, servers and the musicians and choir in particular are highly valued at St Paul’s. I am thrilled by the choir’s recent return and I thank Ian Runnells and Henry Vann specifically for their work. I was delighted by the move of our healing ministry to the Sunday Parish Eucharist and I know this has been much appreciated by many. I express our gratitude to our Lay Ministers, James Beauchamp, Cliff Harris, Margaret Blake and Wendy Jones, who not only have assisted with this ministry but who continue to play a valuable part in our worship and mission. What has been particularly pleasing is that we are very slowly growing a younger congregation of those in their 20s, 30s, and 40s alongside older members; indeed over the past six years the number of our families has increased from around 4 to 12. Doubtless the All Age Eucharist on the first Sunday has helped to widen access to our worship for this group. That said, we still have some way to go. Nationally, there are relatively fewer people in the 20s to 40s age range than those 50 and above. We are being invited to share in the ‘Big Conversation’ with other churches in our diocese to help us “Grow Younger” while still catering for the older generation who are deeply loved and much treasured. Our *survival*, succession planning and resilience, let alone our growth, as a church depends on growing younger. It was good that we have been designated a Major Parish Church and even better to join the *Major Churches Network* (formerly the *Greater Churches Network*); which has given us access to much needed advice and resources. It is important to remember that the Major Churches are all quite different: we are not an ancient foundation like Tewkesbury Abbey or Beverley Minster; nor a university church like Great St Mary’s; neither are we one of the new Minsters. We are a Civic church in an urban and deprived area; consequently our worship, mission and outreach will look different to theirs.

**Pastoral Care**

Providing pastoral care to our slowly growing congregation, scattered across a wide geographical area is a real challenge. The creation of a new Pastoral Group including both clergy and lay people in February 2019 has been a real help over the past eighteen months and I thank them.

**Safeguarding**

You will, I hope, be aware of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse, or IICSA report on the Church of England released this last week. The failures of the church, especially to prioritise victims and to enable perpetrators to be brought to justice, makes utterly shameful reading. Safeguarding is not a bolt on extra to church life but a fundamental part of Jesus’ Gospel and needs to be part of the church’s DNA. I thank all those who have cooperated with DBS checks and undergone training and remind everyone that both of these are *mandatory*. Safeguarding children and vulnerable adults continues to be my *highest* pastoral priority and I thank Sue Gray, our Parish Safeguarding Officer especially for her help and all that she does to keep us all up to the mark. I ask that everyone cooperates with her requests.

**Finance and Fabric**

Keeping a church of this size and complexity running is no mean feat; and I wish to thank members of the PCC and members of its sub-committees, for their hard work and dedication. In particular we should thank Rita Brereton, outgoing chair of the Outward Giving Committee, for having done sterling work to raise the needs of and monies for vulnerable groups and communities, especially in Bedford. In particular, we owe a debt of gratitude to our churchwardens. James Stephenson stood down at the beginning of this year, having excelled himself with the care of the fabric. Florence Bignell and Alison Phillipson, as churchwarden and churchwarden-in-waiting respectively, have been a marvellous tower of strength and wisdom, both to me and to us all, especially over the past six months. I thank Alan Dickinson, our amazingly efficient and hardworking PCC Secretary, who nobly offered to take over as Acting Treasurer a few months ago. Friends, this is too much for one person and we desperately need to find someone else to take this on, which we hope will be a restructured and lighter role. Offers to the wardens, please!

**The Friends of St Pauls**

Judith Howard stood down as Chair of the Friends of St Paul’s 17 months ago and was replaced by Julian Polhill. We are deeply grateful to them both for their time and energy and to the Friends for financial support: for special projects from organs to vestments, and from bricks to computers. So there is much for us to be grateful for: both to God and for each other.

**The Coronavirus Pandemic**

And then, in March 2020: Lockdown. In a matter of hours normality evaporated, to be replaced by a surreal, almost dystopian world. With the singing of ‘Great is thy faithfulness’ at our Sunday Eucharist, St Paul’s closed its doors and we were in virtual house arrest. While some were shielding, the rest of us were isolated, only allowed out for one hour a day. Like many churches, St Paul’s had to turn its operations right round. We had to become a radically different church overnight, communicating through videoed addresses, emails and telephone calls. St Paul’s has over 150 households on our books: and while I set myself the task of contacting everyone for whom we have contact details, I am grateful to members of the PCC and Ministerial Team, who each took a share in keeping in touch with a small group most weeks. Both approaches continue for those who are unable to come to church. Without weekly collections, our financial situation was a real worry. And yet, remember, ‘Great is thy faithfulness’; God is faithful and so are the people of St Paul’s: I thank all those who converted their cash giving to standing order and for what, I am told, have been the many generous donations. After what seemed an interminable lockdown, at last we were able to open the church safely for private prayer in late June, for worship in early August, and to have the musicians back in early October. The last six months have been difficult, stressful and relentless for everyone involved in the running of our church, as it has for the population generally and there has been a real, human cost. I wish to pay tribute to Florence Bignell and Alison Phillipson our churchwardens and the Standing Committee who joined me in steering a course through the considerable hazards; and also to Robin Bartlett our Pastoral Assistant and Centre Manager whose job changed and almost doubled overnight, especially with the departure of Maddy Gamble, our Administrator and Vicar’s PA on maternity leave in February.

They say, “Its an ill wind indeed, however, that blows no-one any good.” The pandemic has been an ill wind indeed, with debilitating sickness and tragic loss of life. Please let me be clear about that. But even in the direst situations God, amazingly, with his transforming love, is indeed able to bring healing for the broken, and bring good out of ill.

Last March, as churches closed, the Archbishops of Canterbury and York wrote to us:

*This is a defining moment for the Church of England. Are we truly a church for all, or just the church for ourselves? We urge you sisters and brothers to become a different sort of church in these coming months: hopeful and rooted in the offering of prayer and praise and overflowing in service to the world.*

So what have we, as church, learned from our experience of lockdown and how different have we become?

I do hope that maybe we might have learned to be more grateful; and especially for the goodness and faithfulness of God? I hope that we have learned to appreciate other people and the things we hold precious more deeply; and be less prone to criticism, and taking them for granted?

I hope we have learned to become less self centred, even selfish, with a reduced expectation that church must “all-fit-me- precisely”, less tailored to what *I want* but open to what *others need*? The vaccine for the virus of self centredness are the twin virtues of *gratitude* and *generosity*.

I am told that a number of people have positively welcomed the fresh, different, quiet style of worship we have enjoyed over the past two months. So how can we be generous to them and learn from this, and sustain this freshness while still recovering our wonderful music and ceremonial which many of us, and I include myself, love and cherish?

I believe that we’ve discovered a new spirit of financial generosity springing from already generous people here; and new ways of reaching out to others in our fellowship. Can we be generous in reaching out to our new congregation online?

Dear Friends, please make no mistake, the world has changed. We live in the present, ‘new normal’, probably with many more ‘new normals’ to come; and we are still in a pandemic which is set to run for many months yet. In a changed world we have to worship and reach out to the world as it *is* and is *becoming*, rather than to the world we left behind or a world we’d rather be in! We too have changed, we’ve become a subtly different church. So we will need a generous heart and spirit if we are bring all the riches of our catholic tradition to the work of mission that God has entrusted to us.

**Mission**

And so, finally, mission. In every church, worship is the mainspring of mission. None of us should think we can come to any church only to worship and ignore mission, or think that mission is someone else’s job. To help us, we will be refreshing the work of the *Leading Your Church Into Growt*h group, or *LYCIG*, under the aegis of our Mission Action Plan, or MAP. This time last year everyone at St Paul’s was invited to participate in a consultation, the results of which were analysed and fed directly by an independent, external facilitator into our PCC Awayday. It was important to me from the start that this should be the church’s and PCC’s Mission Action Plan. I only got the process moving and helped to bring the PCC’s conclusions together at the end, in a written form which the Standing Committee and the PCC could debate, edit , correct and finally approve. Sadly, lockdown prevented the PCC’s presentation at the APCM in March, so I’m glad they are able to do that today. May I say that while it’s the PCCs plan, I heartily support it. For what we have to do as a church is as obvious and plain as a pike staff to me as it is to them!

It has been good to welcome Luke Larner, our new curate, to Bedford last June. But because of Covid, ordinations were unable to take place and he was licensed by the Bishop of Bedford as a Lay Worker on a very windy bandstand on the Embankment. His ordination to the diaconate finally took place just two weeks ago when he formally became our training curate. But Luke’s is not a usual curacy, for Fr Luke as he now is, also brings his prior experience of Pioneer Ministry to St Paul’s. His task is *not* to do the work of mission *for* us, but to enable *us* to do the work of mission *ourselves*, to reach out beyond the walls of this church to those who desperately need to know the love of Jesus Christ for them. Luke’s coming among us is a real gift for which we are thankful.

So I thank you *all* for all that you have done and are doing. I am grateful to you for your love for each other; I am grateful to you for your love and support of me as your Vicar; most of all I am grateful to God. To him alone be the glory. Thank you.

The Reverend Canon Kevin Goss