

Annual Report of the Vicar – St Bartholomew’s, Otford 2020-21

I do not mean to say that I have got there yet, or that I am perfect yet. But I am trying hard to get there, because that is why Christ saved me. My friends, I do not yet think that I have got all the things of Christ. But there is one thing that I am doing. I forget what is behind me and reach out to what is ahead of me. Like an athlete running a race, I try hard to reach the line so that I will receive the prize. Because we belong to Christ Jesus, God is calling us to receive this prize that he has for us in heaven. (Philippians 3:12-14)

It is always a pleasure at an annual church meeting to look backwards and forwards in a constructive and optimistic way, and it is a great joy on this occasion to be able to look back at a year which has seen so many positive things happening in our church, despite the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Even though it has been a period when we haven’t been able to meet together properly for so long the people who make up God’s church at St Bart’s have carried on faithfully. Embracing the demands of new technology, virtual and in-person fundraising, online and offline services and so much more, only the most unobservant would dare to suggest we have stood still or trod water. We have had to reimagine much of what we do and offer but it has still been a time of growth and development in many different ways (just look at the pop-up stalls, our online marketplace, or Zoom meetings, social events and study groups for starters), and I am pleased to be able to reflect something of this in my annual remarks.

Although not a required part of one of these annual meetings, it seems to be a good idea for the Vicar to have the chance to reflect on the past year in a less formal, and perhaps more thoughtful, way and I think it provides a good opportunity to look back at our work and achievements and, more importantly, look forward to new possibilities.

Although things were very different in 2020 and there was a sense of loss personally and corporately in so many ways, there has also been much to celebrate and give thanks for. You will see from the annual report if you haven’t experienced it yourselves how many different ways people have continued to be involved in the life of our church in The Year of the Pandemic.

Not one person who has worked hard in so many different ways to make things happen this past year must be overlooked, and I have deliberately been highlighting people during the course of the meeting so far who have offered so much of their time and talents. If by some chance I have missed anyone off I hope you will accept this as a huge thank you to all those who have played any part in the past year in getting things done, keeping us all going, and keeping us on the right path as a parish with such support, enthusiasm and dedication.

I wouldn’t mind betting that when we first went into lockdown last year most of us had no idea of how long this pandemic would last and the impact it would have on us all. When we have been able to open the doors of our church it has been to a very limited expression of worship and fellowship. This context continues as we look forward to a time of freedom and restoration. However, whilst we may have largely left our buildings, God has not left the church and has continued to work in and through us by His Holy Spirit.

The national ongoing vaccination programme enables us to look forward to utilising our church and community spaces more fully in the next few months, and eventually to resuming the social aspects of our church life in person, when social distancing permits.

The ways in which churches express themselves and their faith may change to meet the differing needs of society, but at our heart is a faith with Jesus Christ as the one who inspires, encourages, and enables. Every church member is called to be a part of the Church’s mission and while not all in the congregation might feel able to go out and spread the word, there are plenty of tasks to be done that can help.

As we ease out of Covid restrictions the fact is that there will be plenty going on but every activity needs fresh blood and ideas and I would ask every member of this church to think and pray carefully about what you might do to help.

That thinking is at the heart of our Called to Grow mission plan, about which Dawn has already spoken, and also a key part of our Generous Giving, Generous Living initiative. People often flinch when churches start to talk about giving or stewardship, but the fact is an understanding of stewardship is an important part of our life and faith together.

An early and basic definition of Christian stewardship is: "Christian stewardship is a way of life in which we regard ourselves and all that we have as a trust from God to be used in his service for what he has done for us in Jesus Christ."

Christian stewardship is, in essence, the Gospel in action and a good steward is one who has responded to the good news and tries to share it.

I think people get bothered about stewardship because they think it is something they have to do alone and that leads them to question their own resources and gifts. But it is a response we make to God in partnership with him.

The prophet Isaiah tells us that, 'They who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength....' God himself is The Great Resource: and as I once read stewardship of the resources which fails to reckon on the availability of God to strengthen, inspire and renew is like making up the petty cash register while sitting in the vaults of Fort Knox!

The Christian is called to be faithful in their service. The original New Testament steward is defined as the manager of a household to whom the head of the house has entrusted his affairs. The Church is the household of God. Therefore, our stewardship is faith in action. And putting that faith into action will require a lot of thought and prayer about how best we can give and live generously.

Yes, it does mean that sitting and doing nothing is not an option. In fact I once heard it said that there are too many spiritually unemployed in the Church.

Good stewardship of our and God's resources is not so much what we are good at but how willing we are to be committed. John Milton dictated poetry when he was blind; Beethoven was deaf when he composed many of his greatest works; Robert Louis Stevenson was in ill health most of his life and yet wrote lasting literature. It is said of D L Moody, the evangelist of the 19th Century, that he had no idea that he himself could teach but he devoted to God his one talent of being able to drum up recruits. Look at the Psalmist David, Martin Luther, William Booth, people who did what they could and were then led further by God.

Stewardship is more than giving money. This is not to imply that money is not important; that money should not get prime attention and that money is somehow unholy, unspiritual and not worthy of serious consideration by Christians. Nothing could be further from the truth. Stewardship and money are related. In its narrow sense stewardship means a set of activities which will motivate Christians to share the resources God has given them; in particular, teaching them to give of their money in thanksgiving for God's continual giving to them. In its broader sense, stewardship is everything a Christian is and does. It is how the Christian responds to his/her creator by using his time and talents as well as money. True stewardship lies in continually giving back to God in gratitude for all that He has done, is doing and will do. This will be a key focus for us in the months ahead.

For me, one of the most important things we have done recently is to hold a Week of Prayer for our parish. I do hope many – in fact I do hope ALL – of you took part in some way and there is no reason why the prayer themes for each day of that special week can't become our ongoing prayers for ourselves and our community, focussing on key aspects of our life together. If anyone would like a copy of the prayer sheet please ask, and continue to concentrate on the various focal points we hope to be working on in the coming year, from our work with young people to our financial and stewardship commitments, and from our pastoral care to our links with the wider community.

Our vision as a church must be to continue reaching out to the community we serve, to be better at sharing our faith and our life, and to make the most of our buildings, so that we can bring the abundance of God's life to those amongst whom we live and work. In this way we play our part in our church's long history as witnesses to God's presence and activity in this place. Thinking back over the ways in which we have had to adapt, and all that we have learnt together in 2020, I believe that our willingness to rise to the challenges of life in a pandemic has been the gift of our faithful and creative God. It has not been easy, and it isn't quite over yet, but we go forward with courage and hope, praying that as we move towards the easing of lockdown, we will continue to know and enact God's vision for his people, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, and in the unquenchable light of Christ.

With my thanks, affectionate best wishes and every blessing to you all.

Rev'd David, April 2021