The Benefice of St Mary, Whitegate, and St Peter, Little Budworth

Vicar’s Report 2020

Written in March before our Annual Meeting was postponed until October.

As I write this report the world is bracing itself for the impact of the impact of Coronavirus (Covid-19) and it seems clear that this will become widespread within the foreseeable future. Whilst for many the symptoms may be mild the disease has already claimed lives and people are naturally anxious. For all our modern progress in healthcare and medicine we remain vulnerable to this new virus and that of itself will shake the foundations of our society. We are not used to feeling vulnerable.

Churches are taking advice about what steps to take. Mostly that has to do with basic common sense such as washing hands and where someone has any form of infectious illness receiving Communion in ‘one kind’, ie the wafer. In some Christian traditions this is normal practice anyway.

We will continue to take advice and act accordingly. I have already had enquiries from couples who are uncertain if their weddings will be able to proceed. What might happen to gatherings such as our Village Fair at Whitegate, or Villagers’ Day at Oulton Park at Little Budworth? We simply do not know at this stage.

What I do know is that the Church has stood within society for countless generations and at its best has been a place of comfort, courage, compassion and care. We may be tested, I believe we shall meet that test in faith, hope and love. The Churches Together network is meeting to consider what response local Christians can make that might support those who face this alone or who feel anxious. We will play a full part in supporting whatever is possible.

Of course a Vicar’s report is usually about looking back over the past year, marking much that has been done well and thanking those who serve our parishes and our communities. I am immensely grateful to our Churchwardens, Parish Officers and members of our PCCs for their wisdom and commitment. I am also deeply thankful for those members of our churches, those many members who behind the scenes, usually unseen and unsung, carry out the thousand and one tasks of the Kingdom. In music, flowers, churchyards, polishing and cleaning, visiting and tasks of administration, we have a good story to tell. As said in my sermon on the day when the Church of England celebrates the life of Edward King, these tasks are the ladder of the saints. Small things done in love and service which bring us daily nearer to God.

I am always mindful that the outside of our churches, including our churchyards, speak a message to all who pass by. A tidy churchyard speaks of a place that is loved and valued. A clean church tells of people who care about this sacred space. Such things proclaim the Gospel – and usually to more people than will ever listen to a sermon. When you wield a duster, or arrange flowers, you are proclaiming the Kingdom.

It is a privilege to be part of a team within our Benefice, we are blessed to receive the ministries of John Stopford, Pauline Hayward and Teresa Finney. We look forward to welcoming Jane Millinchip who will be Licenced on 30th March at Foxhill. I would also like to pay tribute to the many years of devotion given by Joyce Scholefield who has now moved to Surrey to be nearer her family.

I will not repeat major items discussed at our PCCs because they are recorded elsewhere. I would just comment that from my perspective there is a sense of good things coming together which give me cause for hope and optimism. That is not to say that we do not face some significant challenges. In both our parishes we enjoy healthy financial resources but are seeing a continuing decline in giving and a continuing rise in costs. We are overly reliant on the generosity of a small number of people which means we are vulnerable to a sudden decrease in income if just a few people leave.

It is my duty to identify a need for us to grasp this nettle firmly and decisively in the not too distant future. We cannot continue in this manner for ever.

I believe one of our key strengths is that we are a Benefice of two very different parishes. I must confess that this gives me great personal joy and I am delighted to make the most of that richness. The other side of the coin is that at times our differences can make the tasks of administration and planning more challenging, I have spent quite a lot of time and energy simply ‘managing’ the gaps. We have looked at this and I believe we are working towards a way of planning and sharing information that preserves and enhances our diversity whilst at the same time reduces the gaps.

We have held a joint annual planning meeting between our Standing Committees and will hold joint Standing Committee meetings twice a year. That has enabled us to plan the annual diary better and to shape our pattern of PCC meetings so we are sharing what we need to share and doing individually that which is unique to each parish. I understand this might not sound very exciting but it will make a difference and I am thankful for the collegiate support of all those involved.

Over past weeks I have been watching the television series Downton Abbey because I missed it first time round. It struck me that the wider storyline of a family and estate struggling to come to terms with a changing world has a lot of parallels with how the Church of England finds itself today. We have cherished buildings and a history that is deeply embedded in the local community and landscape. We live according to patterns of life that do not readily engage with a rapidly changing world. We have sufficient resources to keep going, but for how long?

I am only part way through so please don’t tell me how it ends. The characters of Downton Abbey are being tested. Some dig in their heels. Some adapt. Some make wise choices, other don’t. We watch with the benefit of hindsight of course, but we do not enjoy that same hindsight as we ourselves face testing. And that is the story of God’s people. Those who choose to live by the will of God have always been tested, and always will be. For God so loves the world that He sent His Son, and now He send His Son’s friends. To seek for the lost, to visit the sick, to comfort the bereaved, to be alongside the prisoner, to be gracious to the fallen, to proclaim a time of the Lord’s favour, to feed the hungry, to raise up the oppressed.

As well as watching Dowton I am also reading in my spare time. One of my favourite writers is John Lewis-Stempel, a Herefordshire farmer who has equal mastery of the plough and the pen. In one of his books he writes of ‘The Painful Plough’, one of the earliest of plough songs.

*Come, all you jolly ploughmen, of courage stout and bold,*

*That labour all the winter through stormy winds and cold,*

*To clothe your fields with plenty, your barnyards to renew,*

*To crown them with contentment, that holds the painful plough.*

The adjective ‘painful’ is used in its original sense as meaning taking pains, careful, industrious. Such is the task before us at this time.

**Paul.**

An update – It seems like another age when I wrote those words for our APCMs to be held in April and May. As I look back over the year there are so many things we have lost, we sense bereavement, frustration and weariness. In some cases people have not enough work to do, others are stretched beyond breaking point. We have reopened our churches and adapted to a situation none of us could have imagined. I suspect the next couple of months may well see further restrictions in how we live.

I would like to express our sorrow for those who have lost loved ones over these past months, many have been unable to have the funeral service they would have hoped for. I am profoundly thankful for the graciousness and generosity shown as we have done our best to make arrangements. When this is over we will hold a community service to remember those who have died and if families wish we will also offer memorial services for individuals.

We have been as proactive as possible during ‘lockdown’. For example, knowing that things would not return to normal, our PCCs reviewed our pattern of services and shaped an interim pattern which enabled us to open as soon as it was possible. We were among the first churches to reopen when it was legally possible.

Not everything has gone to plan. We had explored a ‘drive in’ service held in the field behind the Vicarage using Zoom to share music and words. Whilst that was greeted enthusiastically we were advised it might contravene the legislation in place at the time. By the time it was clearly legal our churches were open again anyway. The constantly changing rules have been a source of considerable stress and led to hours of work which has often being wasted. In one week the regulations changed seven times.

I mentioned above our financial resources. We have been able to sustain our activities by drawing upon our reserves which of course is what they are there for. We are grateful to those who have switched their regular giving to bank transfer as the costs of running the churches has not gone down during this period. There is however a limit to how long our reserves will last and our PCCs will face some significant challenges next year. All of our fundraising activities are of course at a standstill.

We were unable to begin our Messy Church which was planned for June but we will continue to look for new ways to deliver Children’s ministry. Naturally it is very hard to make plans when we don’t know what the future holds but we haven’t stopped trying.

One new trick we have learned is to make more use of the internet and whilst in general people have not favoured live streamed services we have published a weekly pastoral letter and used YouTube to record it from our churches. The feedback is very encouraging, in fact more people listen to the sermon online than actually come to church. The lack of WiFi or mobile signal in our churches is a dilemma and one of the costs we may need to embrace is to adapt our churches for a different world at the end of all this.

We said at the beginning that things will not return to normal when this is over, we have begun to understand just how true that is and I suspect we have much to learn yet. I did get to finish Downton Abbey and it reminded me of how sometimes history takes a turn which shakes the foundations of everything. Such times are uncomfortable and disturbing, they are times when the known passes away, they are also times when the unknown may present opportunities never imagined.

**Paul.**