**Vicar’s Annual Report for the United Benefice of St Mary, Whitegate & St Peter, Little Budworth**

I would like to begin by looking at the ordinary.

We usually think of ‘ordinary’ as mundane, routine, nothing special. In the Church’s year ‘ordinary’ means ‘ordered’. That which is done day by day, week by week, month after month.

These times are anything but ordinary, yet the life of the Church continues, faithfully, diligently, responsibly, patiently.

At St Mary’s the Mission & Giving Committee meeting (via email) decided to donate our tithed giving to two causes, one national and international, the other local. Half is being given the Christian Aid. Our news is full of our own sorrows and troubles but the suffering of others continues. The other half is being donated to the Oak Project. Run by a local church in one of the poorest parishes of our diocese the Oak Project will use the money to provide meals for children during the Easter holiday.

We are in unusual times and there have been some remarkable people. Captain Tom Moore captured the hearts and imagination of our nation and raised £33 million. Marcus Rashford persuaded the Government to look again at feeding children during school holidays and whilst schools are closed. Many families rely on school meals to feed their children.

Such people and stories inspire and achieve great things. But like all such stories they capture public imagination and support for a while and then we move on. The Church does not. We are here in ordinary time, faithfully, diligently, responsibly, patiently. Church projects tackling social isolation or poverty do not make headlines. We do not receive huge sums of public money. But we endure and we will keep on enduring when the headlines move on. I am glad our tithed giving is supporting Christian Aid and the Oak Project.

**Thank you**

I would like to thank on our shared behalf those who have laboured behind the scenes to keep the order of things going during these difficult times. We have learned to engage with new regulations and tackle a bewildering range of legislation. At times the rules have changed several times in a week. It is always dangerous to mention names but I think it is right to express a particular thanks to Martine Petty for the huge amount of work she has undertaken getting to grips with the furlough scheme. That hasn’t been easy and at times the regulations created a great deal of work which was then scrapped overnight and new rules introduced. What must have been tremendously frustrating has been handled graciously and well.

I am very pleased that we have been able to keep our churches open for those who wish to attend communal worship. It was a particular delight to welcome our new Diocesan bishop, Bishop Mark and his wife, Lindsay, to St Peter’s for our Benefice Plough Sunday service in January. The Government has rightly seen a bigger picture and recognised the contribution places of worship make to our national life. It has been interesting how much this has been appreciated by many who seldom, if ever, attend church. In conversations I have had with people it is clear that the local church retains that role which is to be the glue that holds things together.

I know that colleagues in our ministry team and those elected officers of our parishes have had to work in totally different ways, sometimes burning the midnight oil, sometimes sat feeling lost when rules prevent us doing things we know need doing. As we move through this time when things are changing again we find ourselves in the company of God’s people who are a travelling people. God makes new beginnings in the barren places. That is where we are, it takes grace, humility and prayer to discern the way ahead.

**The Engine Room**

Bishop David Sheppard used to say of some people that they are ‘An engine room person’. That was always a compliment. He meant that they are the kind of people who keep things going and on whom other rely. Our engine room people are mostly elected in the nuts and bolts process we know as Annual Parochial Meetings. These have to take place before the end of May and we are making preparations for them. Of course in these unusual times how we do that is a challenge and one which we will have to monitor as lockdown rules change. Whether or not we can be there in person does not change the fact that this is something we all have a responsibility for. Please read the various reports carefully and give good time to considering the need to elect reliable and committed engine room people for our parishes.

We need wise and committed Churchwardens, PCC members and those willing to act as Sidepeople for our services. On our behalf I would like to thank our Churchwardens and PCC members for their diligence through this difficult time. The range of new legislation and procedures during Covid have at times been relentless. We have been well served by those who give of their time and skill in God’s service.

**From here to there…..**

You will not need me to tell you that this pandemic has caused widespread disruption to many ventures. Many businesses and jobs have been put at risk. We still do not know for sure how long some form of restrictions will need to be in place. We have learned to plan one step at a time.

Many of our congregation members have not been able to attend church for a long time. Some have changed their giving to bank transfer for which we are immensely thankful as it has provided a source of regular funding through the past year. All of our fundraising activities have been suspended due to Covid. It seems that quite of few of the people who ran events may not return to doing so. I don’t think we can assume our usual fundraising will ever return to what it was before. With people not attending our giving has been significantly reduced.

You may have seen articles in the press about the Church of England making clergy redundant, some dioceses are indeed having to take this step. So far as I know Chester Diocese has no plans to do the same just yet but we do know there is no budget for 2022.

We know that the immediate future will be challenging. This is nothing new, I have been saying for some time that the Church of England has nettles to grasp, Covid just means we have to grasp them sooner than expected. This is something our PCCs will need to grapple with because whilst we are fortunate to have some reserves those will not last for ever.

**A New Normal**

In early 2020 I remember saying that when this is all over we will not simply pick up where we left off. There will no clean end to Covid, it will be with us for the long term. We will be different and need to learn to do things differently. Some things will come back, some won’t. Steering a course through the next year and beyond will require wisdom, prayer and humility. I suggest that we ask three questions. Why are we doing this? Is it properly resourced? Is it sustainable?

I am therefore asking everyone to prayerfully reflect upon the task before us. We need to elect faithful and courageous people to represent us as Churchwardens and PCC members. The times ahead will bring more change than we have seen in most of our lives. But this is nothing new, previous generations have faced equal challenges, times when the world changed and the Church needed to learn and adapt.

There is no roadmap where we go from here. This is a desert time, the voice of prophecy reminds us that it is in the desert that God acts.

***Paul.***