

SERMON PREACHED BY THE REVEREND JONATHAN ANDREW
AT 8 AND 10AM SERVICES OF HOLY COMMUNION ON 17 MARCH 2019 - LENT 2

Genesis 15:1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3:17-4:1; Luke 13:31-end

Phew – we're nearly there! The vacancy has been a long haul but, as you all know, on Wednesday we welcome Jackie Richardson as our new vicar.

Normally I make a point of basing my sermon on the Bible readings set for the day – it's a good discipline and stops the preacher banging on about his or her particular hobbyhorse - but today I'm going to break that rule because I want us all to think about our experience over the past year and what it all means for the future of St Peter's.

Personally, I must admit that currently my predominant feeling is one of tiredness (and I know I'm not alone in that) but, when I manage to look through the exhaustion, I am excited for this parish – we have recruited an excellent new vicar, and someone who I suspect will bring a rather different style of leadership, a change which we need if we are to make progress in our walk with God.

Of course, the last twelve months have had their frustrations and disappointments:

- The vacancy has been longer than many of us hoped.
- Some things we'd love to get on with have had to be put on hold.
- Some of us still have a way to go in taking personal responsibility for building the church of the future.
- And, again speaking personally, none of this fitted in with my wife and my retirement plans!

But, on balance, I think we do have quite a lot to celebrate. So let me share some of the things that have happened over the past year which make me give thanks to God. You may well have a different list, and if I've missed something do let me know – but gently! Please note I am not naming any names. This would be invidious – everything we've done has been a team effort.

So where do we start? Before the vacancy began, I wrote in 'The Good News' that I prayed that over the months to come we would be generous with one another, generous with our energy, time and prayers, but also generous with each other when things perhaps didn't run as smoothly as they used to. Well, I'm glad to say that things have in fact run pretty smoothly, but I'm even more delighted that never once has anyone said to me, "but Martin used to ...". We've generally recognised each other's limitations and there's been no significant conflict or backbiting. Whatever we've been in, we've been in it together.

Right at the start, Sue and I agreed with the PCC that it wasn't practicable for us to step into Martin's shoes in all of our various teams which he took part in – we'd be available to advise, but leadership would lie with the remaining (predominantly lay) members of the teams. And, with only a couple of exceptions, this has worked well. Indeed, someone said to me last week that conversations in team meetings can be more open and productive if everyone isn't trying to guess what it is that the vicar wants!

- So it was great that the Pastoral Care Team recognised that Sue and I couldn't carry our load of Home Communion visits and took it on themselves to fill the gap. Without prompting, they also took the initiative to hold some lovely tea parties for older members of our congregation who find it difficult to get to church, and who were not now getting visits from the vicar.
- Likewise, the Christian Development Team have given us some new and fresh ways to learn more about our faith and to become more committed Christians.
- We've built a new fresh modern church website, which provides a fitting shop window to the world.
- And the Young Vines Team have taken increasing responsibility for their own worship – with new storytellers and worship leaders, and some growth in numbers as that congregation develops its own identity and sense of shared purpose.

I celebrate that our work at Bell Farm and Burhill Schools, and at our relatively new Mission Partner the Arch Road Youth Club, has grown and deepened. Three members of our congregation have volunteered to provide classroom support at Bell Farm, and another is actively considering joining the Board of Governors. And we saw that this work bears real fruit as, for the first time last Christmas, we hosted services in church for both of our primary schools.

And alongside all of that, we've kept our worshiping life going, not turning away anyone from the Hersham community who has a call on us for marriage, baptism or funeral. We've now fully established the new 'split-worship' format for 1st Sundays as a popular addition to our repertoire of services, and no-one could now accuse 'Music to Calm the Soul' as being a mere concert – increasingly it has had real spiritual depth. And have you noticed the numbers over the last few weeks at our 10am worship? Look around you now - more people are trying us out, more newcomers are coming back – green shoots are appearing.

But, of course, a vacancy isn't just about keeping the show on the road and pressing gently forward on the established path when resources permit – it's also about thinking prayerfully about where God may be calling us to change and grow as we work to build his kingdom. And so I rejoice that the process of preparing the Parish Profile and Statement of Needs was so productive. Of course, it took far too long, but I honestly don't think that was our fault – getting share of mind from the diocese was a real battle! But that's water under the bridge now - what we can celebrate is that such a clear consensus emerged of our relative strengths and weaknesses, our opportunities and the threats we face - and the sort of vicar we need to lead us forward. There were some good and occasionally robust conversations, but overall an amazing unanimity.

And over the next few days we will all experience more of the St Peter's family working together, rolling up our sleeves (literally in some cases) to make Jackie's induction a truly glorious, happy, hopeful and faith-filled occasion.

So, where do we go from here? Well, this is where my message perhaps becomes a little more hard-edged! Yes, with God's help we've done well over the last year and there is much to celebrate, but we mustn't slip into the mindset that this is the end of the journey and that with Jackie's arrival St Peter's can return to 'business as usual'. Our Vision Day and the resultant Parish Profile made it clear that continuing as we were (gentle, steady, comfortable decline) was not an option. Of course, the fundamental spirit of St Peter's,

that this is an open parish church with a mission to be at the heart of the community, must not change – it's far too precious. But, if we are to work with the Holy Spirit to use that precious gift to the full, then we have to grasp the reality that potentially every member of this church family, young and old, has a part to play.

Of course Jackie won't change things immediately or for the sake of it - although she does have her own individual style - and those of you who've had the opportunity to meet her will know what I mean! But I'm sure that her priority in her first months will be getting to know you, getting to grips with the reality underlying the Parish Profile, and starting a process of building mutual trust – and that will take time. When change does come it will be well thought through and, no doubt, considered fully by the PCC and our various teams.

So, I urge you to continue in that spirit of generosity as you and Jackie get to know one another. To state the obvious, she's not another Martin (or another Jonathan or another Sue) – she's her own woman, and it was because of the special gifts that she brings that she was chosen. And bear in mind that, unlike Martin, she has a family to consider. A number of members of the congregation told me how much they longed for a young family in the Vicarage. Well, that's what you've got, but bear in mind that that family rightly deserves, and will get, a fair share of Jackie's love and attention. As we support her in her church life, we must also support her family life.

But also bear in mind that Jackie and this parish will face some significant challenges over the coming months. Sheila, who did such a brilliant job refreshing our Christian Development efforts will move on to her curacy in Godalming in June and I will, at last, be retiring in July. This will reduce the number of Ministry Team hours available at St Peter's very substantially. But, like all changes, this potentially creates not just a problem but also an opportunity. Short term, of course, some things may need to be simplified but, in the longer term, what we've seen during the vacancy gives me every confidence that, under Jackie's leadership, you can build a new way of being church, a way that doesn't rely as much on ordained clergy, but which enables everyone to contribute their gifts and talents, to the Glory of God.

Amen