

St Mary's APCM 2020

### **The Vicar's Reflection**

I want to begin this year's reflection with heartfelt thanks to three fellow-ministers in Christ's service: Firstly, a huge 'thank you' to Rev'd Andrew Axon for chairing this APCM as Area Dean, and for all he has done in that role and since he arrived in our Deanery. I shall say no more because he will be embarrassed to read it out but he has been a good support to me and to others. Thank you, Andrew.

I also want to say a huge 'thank you' to Rev'd Nicky Harvey, not only for looking after this wonderful church during my time away but for all she has done for this church and our community during her entire time with us. Thank you, Nicky, you are much appreciated not only by me, but by everyone in this room.

Finally thanks are always due to Rev'd Christopher Miles, who has not only been a support to Nicky during my sabbatical but has been a constant source of support and wisdom for my whole time here. Thank you, Christopher.

I am writing this reflection at the end of February, on the last day before my sabbatical begins. If everything goes to plan then, by the time of St. Mary's APCM at the end of April, I should just have returned from Tanzania and should be thinking about going to West Africa shortly. However, as I write, it seems that the world is shutting itself down to prevent the spread of coronavirus so it is just as feasible that we shall all be in quarantine! The archdeacon will have to advise on the legality of an APCM conducted by disinfected conference call. We lack some guidance from the past as I don't think they had APCMs during the Black Death, for which I am sure they were grateful.

Looking back to church life in 2019 I make no apology for wanting to start, once again, from a place of thankfulness. It is very easy to get caught up in a spirit either of nostalgia or of competitiveness and to then spend all one's energy comparing church life either with the past or with how we imagine other churches are faring. The danger with doing either is that we miss all the good things that are currently happening here. We do need to look to the

future, and I will come to that in a moment, and we also need to value and build upon the past but unless we give thanks for the present we run the risk of missing the gift that God is giving to us right here and right now. Of course, we face both demographic and financial pressures that are increasingly common across the Church of England and, indeed, across many other churches, but we are also richly blessed at St Mary's in so many ways, not least because we are the people who are called to be the Body of Christ in this place and at this time and if that is not a privilege and a blessing I don't know what is.

Last year I welcomed the growth and success of the Messy Church services, and that continues to be a place of real growth and joy in our church life. Each service seems to bring back not only the regulars but also new families. I was told by one mum that on the day of Messy Church, which started at 3.30 pm, her son had been pestering her from about 5.00 am that morning, asking when it would start. I apologise to her but how wonderful to hear a young person pestering to come to church! Messy Church has come from Nicky's energy, creativity and love of craft materials and we need to work together to ensure that Messy Church can continue when the inevitable happens and Nicky moves on.

The same applies also to our Café Plus meetings, which have been a blessing to a different age group. We can become obsessed by the idea that church growth means youth work but there is a great deal to be said about becoming more intentional about looking after our older people. So this, coupled with the Holiday at Home and the possible appointment of an Anna Chaplain could be a real focus of our future ministry as a church.

Although 2019 did not contain any ordinations for Nicky (unlike the previous 2 years) it was great to see two members of our congregation, Kelly and Francesca, be accepted for ordination training and begin their courses. It was also great to welcome Andrew Cameron here on placement and to work with the other students from St Augustine's here for their mission project.

## Thanks

A hugely important part of the purpose of the APCM is to acknowledge all the areas of church life and those who contribute to them. Now I can't thank everyone personally in this reflection, but I would certainly refer you to the APCM report which demonstrates very clearly how much goes on here, and how many people play a vital part in keeping this church the vibrant community that it is. This event is a reminder that church is not something that is done to you, but it is only possible when it is something that is done together, with everyone using their different skills and callings. I think that St Paul has one or two things to say about that.

Whilst I can't thank everyone by name there are some people that I must thank personally, but not only on my own behalf but on behalf of us all.

Firstly everyone should know that this church and this parish simply could not function without all the hard work of **Janice Massy**, our parish administrator. Administration is actually one of the gifts of the holy spirit and I have no doubt that Janice has that gift! Unless you have seen behind the scenes of how the parish works you probably have no idea of how much there is to do but the rotas, newsletters, wedding, funeral and baptism bookings, dealing with the photocopier, trying to get any sense out of the vicar is a massive job. And, of course, Janice also does a huge amount organizing our Fundraising and Outreach events, which are so vital to our shared life. Thank you Janice!

Of course also huge thanks to our Churchwardens **Michael and Barbara**. They have been hugely supportive and hardworking. Unless you have been a churchwarden it is hard to imagine just how much goes into the job but, a bit like being a vicar, it is a lot more than carrying sticks around on a Sunday. I really appreciate all that they do. Sadly Barbara is stepping down as Churchwarden with effect from today (having served her time in full, with no time off for good behavior) but I am pleased she is continuing to act as our parish safeguarding officer for the time being.

Huge thanks also to Martin Massy who has done a magnificent job as treasurer, PCC secretary and as convenor of the fabric committee. A number of very big jobs which are little seen by the congregation. Thank you Martin!

On the subject of the gift of Administration, thank you also to **Linda Yabsley** who has acted as our PCC minute taker this year. Thank you Linda.

Of course we also need to thank the PCC and Deanery Synod members who give up evenings throughout the year to help guide the life of the church. Huge thanks to everyone who has served in that capacity and to those who have put themselves forward for the new PCC.

One of our chief characteristics in this church is the high standard of our music and our choir. I must therefore offer huge thanks to Antony Le Fleming for all he has done since joining us. Thanks too to Michael Pound, to Francis Griffiths, Sue Mason and to all the members of the choir, both senior and junior, for augmenting our worship so beautifully every week.

But, of course, there are so many others: those who run Coffee Pots and Tiny Tots, Who Let the Dad's Out, our Men's and Ladies Breakfasts, the sidesmen, the flower ladies, those who run children's work, the servers, the readers, the intercessors, the choir, those who do church watch, our hospital car service, our bell ringers, **Anne Hughes** for acting as verger, those who clean, those who sit on committees, those who do teas and coffee after church. Thank you all, everyone, give yourselves a round of applause.

## **Golden Green**

As you know I am vicar not only of St Mary's Hadlow but our parish also includes the Mission Church at Golden Green. I therefore need to say a few words about the ministry which is happening there.

The highlight of the church year in Golden Green is undoubtedly the Christmas Carol service. That service is always packed out,

we have a keyboard player, a mini choir, mince pies, mulled wine and it is great fun. Christmas 2019 was no exception on that front, indeed it may have been more packed than ever, despite Hartlake Road being flooded again that evening.

Sadly, attendance at the other services we sought to lay on at Golden Green was very poor and the decision was taken last year to stop the monthly services. You may or may not recall but before my arrival here the decision had been taken by Clifford not to take monthly services, but I sought to re-boot it and have tried a number of different things there over the years. It seems that those who live in Golden Green who wish to go to church will travel out of the village to go to other churches, either here or Tonbridge or elsewhere and there does not seem to be a huge appetite for monthly church there. It was quite telling that when we stopped the services I wrote a piece for the Hamlet newsletter asking people for any suggestions they might have about how we could do things differently and there wasn't a single response.

We shall continue to celebrate Christmas and Easter in the mission hall, shall continue to put up posters and newsletters in the notice boards there and be available to all who need us but, for the time being, we are not worshipping there on a regular basis. Of course we remain open to thinking again as circumstances change.

### **What comes next?**

So what next for St Mary's over the coming year?

As already flagged up we do face a number of challenges in the year ahead and, whilst celebrating our blessings, we need to face the future realistically.

At some point during the next 12 months Rev'd Nicky will be moving on, no doubt, to a parish of her own. That will be a challenge and a huge adaptation for us all, and will doubtless cause a period of 'mourning' in the church. We need to be prepared for that.

We also face the challenge of a gradual decline in numbers as some of our older members are called home to glory and even some of our younger families find that their teenagers are pulling

them in different directions on a Sunday morning.

Finally, we face an increased financial challenge. As we all know in our personal lives the cost of living never seems to go down and that applies equally to the costs of running a church. We need to get more intentional about our personal giving, but also more creative about the way we seek to support the finances of the church from other sources.

So there are challenges ahead, but there are also opportunities. I think that the biggest growth opportunity for the church comes from learning how to be of service to those around us. We are surrounded by endless need, whether our eyes are open to it or not, and if we seek to serve that need in the name of Christ then that is the best possible witness to the effect that being Christians has had on our lives. To serve others out of love, to be open with them about why we do it and to help them to find ways into making a response of their own is, in my view, far more powerful than simply fiddling with our worship and hoping that people will come. We need to be such good Christians out there that people will be clamouring to know what goes on in here. Our steadily growing work with the foodbank is an example of this kind of service but I have no doubt that every single person here knows someone in need – serve them in the name of Christ.

### **Conclusion**

This is a good place, filled with good people, and there is no doubt that God is at work in this community. We must treasure that and not take it or each other for granted.

God willing, I look forward to being back with you on Trinity Sunday and to journeying on with you into God's future.