

St Mary's APCM 2020 – October – The Vicar's Reflection - The Covid Update

When I came to write the reflection for today I was reminded that one of my last tasks before my sabbatical was to write the reflection for the APCM due to take place in April.

I could have ripped that up and started again, because it feels so out of date now, but I decided to read it out in full, before giving this update, for two main reasons:

1. One of the purposes of the APCM is to reflect on church life from the previous year of 2019 and, of course, all of that still applies regardless of what happened in 2020 and it would not be correct to re-interpret last year through the distorted lens of this year; and
2. Looking at that snapshot of church life from this current perspective is a reminder of the vibrancy of church life in this place.

Such a reminder could have the effect of being depressing as it highlights all the things which have changed since the first lockdown in March and all that is currently lacking in our church community compared to what was there before. I totally understand that and, believe me, as your vicar I feel that in every fibre of my being. I have never been the 'high-maintenance' sort who wears their stresses publically but I would simply say that you should not underestimate the mental burden of being in public ministry at this time. When you have been somewhere for a good few years, when you do have a good Christian community operating in many ways and in many spheres, and you see that all stripped away and all pared back initially to nothing more than a Facebook broadcast because even the church is locked to us, then that is tough, very tough. Although there is some hope in that, as I shall come to in a moment.

But looking back to what church life was like before covid should also be a source of encouragement. It reminds us that we are capable of so much more and that when restrictions are lifted, and although we don't know when that will be we do know that this won't last forever, then we know that we can re-build our worshipping community.

So I want to encourage us that the good times can return, what we have now is not all that there can be.

But we should not underestimate the challenges which lie ahead in rebuilding our church community. I mentioned some of those challenges in the reflection I just read and there is no doubt that covid has increased the financial pressures and put on hold many of our more social outreach activities. Although things have improved since the first lockdown, and the mere fact we are back in church at all is testament to that, it is also quite possible that in the weeks and months ahead there will be varying levels of restrictions until such time as a vaccine is available.

But I do have hope. I'll tell you why. Firstly, being stripped back of all the extras which go with church life, the social functions, the coffee, the boot fairs, the concerts and going back to the basics of daily prayer and the sacraments without adornments is not the worst thing in the world. If we are to look for good in the situation then I find that in being taken back to the basics of the Christian life. The early church prayed together and shared communion before they put together a social calendar. Whilst only priests are required by canon law to celebrate the daily offices I would encourage you all to pray everyday and there are no excuses these days for not being able to – there are apps and books and facebook streams aplenty. Pray and engage with the scriptures each day and get back to the roots of who calls you to this place and why.

My hope and my prayer is that having been stripped back to the basics of our Christian life and worship that we have the people and the spirit amongst us to put some things back together. But, as we do that, I would also urge a spirit of discernment. The task of 2021 is not to re-create the church of 2019, or 1919 or 1819. The task that lies ahead of us is to discern what we can do with the resources we have, what we need to do given the community we inhabit and, most

importantly, what God calls us to do in this place. But we do have a lot of resources here and I am looking at them right now. If we want Hadlow to have a spiritual heart, and if we want that to be St Mary's then we are not to use covid as an excuse to back off and let other people get on with it, because if everyone does that then I can show you a church building in Hawkhurst which is being converted into flats. Sisters and brothers in Christ. No matter how long you have been here and no matter what jobs you have done for the church before you are not the past of St Mary's – you are its present and its future. We are all called to pray, to evangelise, to worship and to play our role in the life of the church, whatever that may be. Because everyone has a role in God's economy.

Part of the function of the APCM is to gather and recognise the huge diversity of roles that are exercised here and I shan't repeat all the thanks from my previous reflection.

But there are some updates. Anthony Le Fleming has subsequently retired as our director of music and he goes with all our blessings and thanks. We shall be holding a proper send off for him next month and I am looking forward to hearing him play again. I thank Francis and Michael for stepping into that breach and I hope that we can start to re-introduce more music into our worship, especially when singing is allowed once again.

Rev'd Nicky Harvey has now been installed as the Vicar of Marden and I hugely delighted with that successful conclusion to her curacy, we are all hugely thankful for the ministry she exercised amongst us and we continue to bless her and pray for her new ministry there.

Barbara Smith has now stepped down as churchwarden and we all owe her a huge debt of gratitude for her hard work as both churchwarden and child protection officer. Barbara is moving to Midhurst in Sussex very shortly and she goes with all our thanks and blessings. Of particular note in the last six or seven months has been Barbara's knowledge and expertise in matters relating to Health & Safety and the completion of risk assessments. Thank you.

Finally thank you to John Speed who are agreed to step up as church warden, which is no small step at this time. Obviously I have known John since I arrived, and many of you have known him a lot longer, and I am grateful that he has taken on this role – thank you John.

That's quite enough from me for the moment – we have another APCM in April and I must stop talking before then. God bless, Paul