

# **St Mary's APCM 2021**

## **Vicar's Reflection**

A quick reminder that the APCM that took place last October was in relation to the year which ended in December 2019. This meeting relates to the year which ended in December 2020, the year of Covid.

Whilst there are things to be thankful for, and I shall come to those, we should also be honest with ourselves: 2020 was a tough year for everyone. Nationally over 150,000 have died and around the world 3 million have died of covid. Many more are suffering from long covid, including people we know from this congregation.

People were shut-in for months, businesses closed and millions put on furlough. The education of our children disrupted hugely. There has been physical, psychological and economic damage which, I suspect, we have hardly begun to count.

And, of course, our churches were not immune to that disruption.

When the national lockdown was announced in March our congregational life was also suspended, which is understandable. Unfortunately, this diocese went even further than most, and wrote to all priests to inform us that to even enter our own church buildings, on our own to pray or stream services, could make us subject to disciplinary action. So not only were our churches shut but we were shut out of our churches at our time of greatest crisis.

At the point of the first national lockdown I was three weeks into my Sabbatical and rapidly losing hope of getting to Africa. I met with the churchwardens and Nicky and it was agreed that Nicky would stream services from her home which she did with aplomb. She also worked closely with the parish council in relation to the use of the food bank and our huge thanks go to her.

Of course, not only was our normal worship life suspended but so were all the other parts of our life which have been so valuable in recent years – Coffee Pots and Tiny Tots, Messy Church and everything else.

On 1 June, I returned from my locked-down Sabbatical and Nicky went onto a 3 month placement at Watlington, Mereworth and West Peckham. We moved our worship life onto Zoom, streamed from my repurposed study – The Chapel of Our Lady of the Blessed Webcam – and we all gradually

learnt when and how to unmute ourselves and continued to grow into what it meant to be a dispersed and online Christian community.

Had covid happened only a few years earlier, before the widespread use of broadband internet, then goodness knows what we would have done. I have a friend who lives in Florence who said that the churches there simply closed their doors for months, because they could do nothing else, and the same is probably true in lots of other parts of the world. Whilst online worship is far from perfect, and it does exclude those who can't work the technology at least we were able to do something, for which we should be grateful.

Eventually we moved to streaming from church and this included Kelly & Francesca leading two services for us during August, both learning new skills that none of us have been taught at theological college.

In September, we managed to get back into church, albeit with limited numbers and having to cope with online ticketing – an anathema in many ways, but a necessary one.

In October I was delighted to attend Nicky's licensing as Vicar of Marden, and to send her off with the prayers, blessings and thanks of this whole parish.

Much of the Autumn was a rather confusing picture of shifting local lockdowns and usually big events such as Harvest, Remembrance Sunday and even our Christmas celebrations were all muted. And then, of course, in January we were closed again until Easter, but that is another story, for next year's APCM.

For those of us born after the Second World War I think it is uncontroversial to say that 2020 was the most challenging year since the war and at least one older person has said to me that they preferred it during the war because at least you could see the enemy and understood the danger.

If admitting that you have a problem is the first step to recovering from it then we should not be afraid to say that 2020 was a problem.

But there is still much to be grateful for.

First and foremost, and against many odds, we have largely hung together as a church. We are all a bit older and a bit more haggard than we were,

some of us are in the building and some of us are online but we are still gathering together around word and sacrament week by week.

Of itself that demonstrates that our coming to church goes much deeper than habit, because if we wanted to break that habit there has been plenty of opportunity. It also demonstrates that it is possible to strip away much of what we have taken for granted as part of worship but still worship.

I have spoken in the past about priests celebrating the eucharist in the gulags using primitive vessels and whispering the words and the church survives – much can be stripped away and still Christ is at the centre, in fact even life itself can be stripped away and we are reminded that we are a church built not on earthly success but on death and resurrection.

And we should also be grateful that we have turned something of a corner and we do now have an opportunity to resurrect the life of St Mary's. Which, in a sense, brings me to the most important thing I have to say at this meeting. We now have a once in a generation opportunity to think about how we rebuild the worship life of St Mary's.

Do we want to make the church exactly as it was in 2019? If the answer to that is 'yes' then we will need people to step back forward to fulfill all the roles we need. Just thinking about our team of altar servers, some have now retired through age, two are now both churchwardens and therefore otherwise engaged and Kelly, Olivia and Jack either have moved on or will shortly be doing so. So if we want to have cross and candles and servers then we shall need volunteers. Similarly with all the other areas of church life which we took for granted, if we want to re-create the church that we had then people will need to gradually emerge and re-engage and rebuild.

But the answer may also be 'no', we want to do things a bit differently or perhaps very differently.

The events of 2020 have given us carte blanche to look at our church life and decide what to keep, what to change and what to let go. But this is not a job just for me. During the course of 2021 the churchwardens, the PCC and the whole congregation need to become involved in thinking about those questions and laying the groundwork for what the church of 2022 and beyond will look like.

Quite what that process will involve I don't yet know, as we have not had that discussion with the new PCC. But there may be a case for asking an external consultant to come and sit with us and chair those discussions.

But we should be excited by these possibilities – because we either rebuild the church and the worship that we have been used to, in which case we may learn to cherish it more, or we can build something more tailored – not tailored to our needs and desires but tailored to growing the church and serving our community going forward.

So, members of the PCC, your first collective task is to help me start that process.

I would normally end my reflection by thanking people.

After wrestling with this for some time I have decided not to do that this year.

That is not because there are not lots of people deserving of huge thanks. There are. Lots of people in this room and also online and elsewhere this morning have gone above and beyond the call of duty numerous times during 2020, and continue to do so. People have taken on all sorts of tasks that they never signed up for, furniture and food banks have been moved more than once, and no two weeks have been quite the same. As years go it has often been Herculean just to keep things going and we are only here and functioning because of lots of people all doing a great deal of work. But once I start naming names (following on from my sermon this morning) there is the ever present danger of missing out just one person or group and, this year in particular, I don't dare do that.

So, I am deeply thankful to you all and for all everyone did to get us through 2020, I am thankful that we are here and my deepest prayer is that in 100 years time the congregation of St Mary's will look back on these times as we might do to the wars, and just be thankful that we got through and kept the faith.

As I said at the end of my last but one APCM reflection – 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 bless,

Rev'd Paul