

VICAR'S APCM ADDRESS (19April2021)

The past fourteen or so months have certainly been an exceptionally difficult time for all of us, with three major lockdowns thus far – although, encouragingly, we appear to be successfully coming out of the latest lockdown.

We have lost a great many people to the Covid-19 virus, and many more have been required to shelter completely from the frightening spectre of its life-threatening behaviour and consequences.

Hopefully, we shall all soon emerge from its clutches into a 'New Normality' whatever that may look like. One thing, however, is quite certain – the future will NOT be the same as that which went before, as so many things have changed, and so many previously held certainties are a thing of the past. Put very simply, the Church (indeed our nation and the world) will never be quite the same in the future as what it once was.

In discerning and forming the features which will define the 'New Normality', we shall need to: (a) be prepared to be open to change and adopting new ways of being Church – absorbing the many lessons which we have learnt throughout the pandemic, (b) be patient and caring with one another, (c) be accepting that the role of the Church – whilst principally concerned with the task of preaching and proclaiming the good news of the Christian Gospel – will also involve our engagement with the various pressing issues of today – more on that in just a moment.

As I said in the preface to the Annual Report and Accounts, I am extremely grateful to all those who have played an important role in maintaining and developing the life of our Church throughout this difficult period; whether through the provision of regular information and communications to the parish, providing alternative pastoral and practical care to those in need, cleaning, maintaining and eventually opening our properties for private prayer and limited public worship on a Sunday morning, providing materials and resources for our on-line daily reflections and weekly on-line services of reflection, and offering many other forms of practical and pastoral support.

I am particularly grateful to the Clergy and Reader Team, the various Church Officers (Verger, Treasurers, Administrator, Cleaners, Members of the PCC, Churchwardens (both current and emeriti) all of whom have provided tireless help and support through their efforts and support. We all owe a very large debt of thanks to them all.

Throughout the pandemic, we have needed to learn how to be 'Church' in a number of different ways ... particularly through the use of social media and 'Zoom' – as we are currently doing so this evening. We have been able to enjoy daily Bible reflections, weekly Services of Reflection, Junior Zoom Church and Messy Church, and many other ventures besides. To everyone involved in these ventures, please accept my immense thanks and praise – especially to the parents of our young families who have done so much to make much of this a reality.

In short, a massive thank you to all of you for coping with the disruption and upheaval which this pandemic has brought to each of our lives.

As a Church family within the local community, we simply must maintain our involvement within that community. I know for sure, that our weekly newsletter has been a lifeline for many, and has demonstrated that the Church is alive and well within this community. Why not take a few moments to consider to whom you might make copies of the newsletter available and either advise them of the web link or else post a copy (when permitted to do so) through their door?

As I said in my address during the APCM last October, during the pandemic, we have, lost contact with a number of individuals ... Some of whom have passed away or moved to other areas of the country. But I am also painfully aware that some individuals may well have slipped between the cracks. We all, therefore, need to continue doing everything in our power to renew our contact with such individuals and seek to include them in whatever ventures we are allowed to provide in addition to reaching out to those who are not yet Christian around us.

As I intimated earlier, alongside preaching the good news of the Christian Gospel, we need to actively engage with the pressing issues of the day.

The Archbishop has already drawn the Churches attention to the pressing issue of Climate Change, and only today we have been encouraged to engage further the issue of racism – both within and without the Church. Indeed, only a month ago I attended a Bishop's study day on the subject, with a view of every parish defining and developing strategies to engage with such a pressing issue.

We are now going to watch a short video – made by the Archbishop – to set our thoughts processing what we, as a parish church, might seek to do.

[WATCH THE CLIMATE CHANGE VIDEO FROM ARCHBISHOP J WELBY AT THIS POINT]

Stemming from the Archbishop's comments, all of our housegroups shall soon start following a nine week series of studies on the issue of climate change, and I would encourage you to participate in these. It will also be possible to engage with the course directly from the front page of the parish website. Further details will be made available within the weekly newsletter as the course is delivered in the coming weeks.

Following this course, the PCC will deliberate on a tangible response before we move on to the next pressing issue of our day.

As the pandemic continues to grip our lives, it's quite noticeable that many people are starting to fray at the edges. Recognising this, we must all ensure that we give each other adequate time and space, and recognise that an essential ingredient of being a Christian disciple is showing love and compassion, whatever the cost to us personally.

Above all else, we need to keep praying for one another ... for our local communities ... for our nation and its leaders ... and for the worldwide situation.

In summary, whatever the future holds for us, we must all maintain our vigilance in limiting the spread and effect of viruses such as Covid-19, whilst at the same time continuing to provide for the effective mission and ministry of the Church within the parish and beyond. We must also continue to pray without ceasing for all those affected by the virus in whatever ways.

It should almost go without saying that once we have started to engage with the 'New Normality' we shall need time to recharge our spiritual batteries – and I have to say that this will be especially true for the Clergy and Reader team who have worked tirelessly and continuously throughout the pandemic, all of whom are all beginning to feel the physical and mental effects of constant challenge and long hours and days.

Whatever the future may hold, we do at least know who it is who holds the future.

May the Lord richly bless you and preserve you unto everlasting life.

Amen.