



Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, Rickmansworth

Annual Parochial Church Meeting
26th April 2009

Report from the Priest-in-Charge

As many of you will recall, I was unable to be at the APCM last year due to my father's very ill health. I should like, as I begin my 'report' this year, to thank you for the prayers and cards and support shown to me during the period of both my father's illness and the weeks after his death. It felt very exposing having such a momentous life-event happen in my first months here and I am grateful for those who offered kind words and recognised too that it takes time to recover.

I should like to begin, if I may, by returning to the sermon I preached on my first Sunday here at St. Mary's – not the whole thing, don't panic! Some of you may recall that the sermon was, in some senses, a setting out of my stall, or even giving an account of myself as the person appointed as the Priest in Charge. It was also though, about sharing with you something of the shape of my ministry, and how I hoped that would be lived out with and within the community of St. Mary's.

That sermon was based around three words: affirm, illuminate, summon. It is these words that I would like to use as the shape and basis for my report today, exploring something of where they have led us thus far, and where they might lead us on.

The first word: **Affirm**

In this section, I begin with some thank you's.

Firstly to my colleagues in Ministry: Phil, Anne and Michael. I am grateful to each of them, as I am sure you are, for their continued ministry in our church and my personal thanks are offered for their support to me as Priest in Charge and as a Priest with Authorised to Serve status within the Methodist Church. Each of them has their own gifts and wisdom, and we are lucky to have each of them 'on board'. As you will appreciate, for Anne this coming year will bring with it significant change, and I am glad that we will have an appropriate opportunity to offer more fulsome gratitude and thanks for her ministry in the Church – particularly here at St. Mary's – on 31st May. I hope that all will be able to attend her Retirement Service as well join in the celebration of her ministry following that Service.

As we are in the Great 50 days of Easter, I felt it appropriate on this occasion to offer thanks to all who share in the preparation and execution of our worship at St. Mary's, as well as offer them encouragement in all that they do.

You will recall that David Jeffers and his wife, Thelma, moved away from Rickmansworth in January. As their departure not long before Lent and Easter, the need to find a replacement for David as Sacristan was imperative. I am grateful to David Gilbert, Sue and Geoff Hillier and Dorothy Denzer for taking on shared responsibility for this area of work. When I shared the news of David Jeffer's departure, I shared too the wide and varied range of tasks he undertook in his capacity as Sacristan and Verger, so you will now have some idea of the wide and varied range of tasks these four have now undertaken. I offer my thanks to each of them. Alongside the tasks these people have undertaken in preparing for our Sunday worship is the cleaning and ironing of the linen we use. Anne carries out this task and others stand in when she is away. To Anne, and to her helpers, thank you.

One of the delights of being at St. Mary's is our well ordered worship. I know some would like it to be higher and some would like it to be lower and some would like smells and some would like choruses. Personally, I feel there is a place for all, but not on every occasion! And so, with the ordering of our worship comes thanks to our Servers, under the watchful eye of Sue and Chris Hillier. The unobtrusive manner in which each of them undertakes their duties ensures we are well served and well cared for in our worship... and if you wonder what I mean by well cared for, you may not have noticed when they have had to slip out for a glass of water for the Celebrant or a new battery for a microphone. Thank you to each member of the serving team – both 8 and 10 o'clock.

We are so fortunate in having a Choir, Choir Director and fulltime Organist. So many churches have lost theirs and many visitors comment on their presence. During the year they have enhanced our regular worship each Sunday and at major Festivals, in addition to putting on a few extras at my behest, such as the St. Cecelia Service and Advent Carols. They even graciously put up with me exercising my erstwhile musicianship skills by allowing me to lead the rehearsals and conduct for those events. And so I thank Sue Murdoch, Andrew Sykes and each member of the Choir for their time and their talents and the manner in which they lead us and encourage us in our worship, Sunday by Sunday, and at the midweek services when they occur.

These lead us in our worship inside the church, but I cannot forget those who call us to church worship – our Bellringers. They ring each Sunday – usually twice if possible, as well as enhance the occasion for Weddings. Bellringing is not a skill acquired quite overnight, and so their dedication is worthy of note – as is their invitation for anyone who wishes to come and try it out and give it a go. From them and the Choir and the Serving team, the message is, new members always welcome!

Don't worry Sidespeople, your moment of glory will come!

But what of all of you who come and share in worship from the other side. My affirmation comes for you in the manner of your welcome and your ministry in other areas of our church life.

St. Mary's is very much the Parish Church of Rickmansworth. Over the past year we have baptised: 20; married: 13 and buried: 30. People come to our church to celebrate their joys and find solace in their woes. Celebration and solace is made possible by the commitment of each of you to your church, to your community and to your God. Affirming who we are as a church community means that we need to understand who we are. I have found many of the people of our church to be committed, faithful and loyal. There is a strong sense of identity as the Parish Church and a desire to be open to others who may wish to join us. The Reports you have in your Annual Reports document, documents the rich variety of activity undertaken by our community, for our community – community both within the church and without. I am immensely grateful to all those who offer their time and talents to this wealth of activity.

The second word: **Illuminate**

In the year and a half I have been here thus far, a lot of my time has been spent listening. The 'come and talk to me' events, the various working parties, committees, different gatherings – for study, prayer and socialising – in all of these has been the task of being attentive to where and how this community has been, and where and how it might move next – for nothing ever remains static. All church communities are diverse in their membership and rich and rewarding for it. As you will have heard me say at two of the funerals I have taken for church members this year, the people clergy serve are the greatest gift we receive. This is true for each member of the church; you are gift to one another.

I have spoken of the welcoming community here, and of the work already undertaken, as recorded in the document you have before you. Work has already taken place to develop something of the work already being done, and to breathe new life into some of it too: some things have evolved and some things have begun anew. I should like to share something of that work with you now.

For our Children and Young People:

Workshops linked to the major Festivals of the Christian year have taken place – with a total of 48 children, a good percentage of whom have no direct link with St. Mary's taking part. These are a good opportunity for teaching about the life of Jesus and a subtle way of exposing children to the Church. The decorated egg tree in church at present is one of the fruits of the last Activity Day.

Last Autumn, the Glitter and Glow event was offered as a direct alternative to other Hallowe'en activities – affirming us as children of light, not of darkness.

Toddler Praise has moved its time slot and evolved into Little Angels at St. Mary's, and with this change has attracted a regular gathering of five or six families represented.

The Youth Group has also evolved, now catering for Young People over the age of 11 and taking place on a Sunday evening. Activities have included bowling, videos and pizza, handbell ringing – as well as following a course designed to affirm and encourage our young people in their faith. If they were all to come, there would be about 8 or 10... small but perfectly formed, perhaps!

For those of more mature years, *Tuesday Night Prayers* affords opportunity to explore new ways into prayer. This is an area close to my heart, and was one of the things that I felt I would be able to bring to St. Mary's – a deepening of the spirituality of this community, building upon and extending all that has been before. As I always say, don't say it is not for you before you have tried something, rather, come along and see.

There have been people hiding who have theology degrees... if there are more: come out, come out, wherever you are! Whether you have a Theology degree or not the Theology Book Group is a place to extend thinking and ways of doing theology. This has been a place where those who have done some academic study brush off the dust of their grey cells, and those who have not formally prove that they have some – and in it, somewhere to the front, is God who has called us here.

In addition, Simon Allard helped to organise The Big Draw in October which did indeed draw people in to have a go at some drawing and artistic activity. How skilled so many people at St. Mary's are... thank you to Simon for that.

You will recall though, the Saturday morning groups that took place last September and the leaflet produced thereafter detailing some of the suggestions for activities to be begun and areas of our church life that might be explored further. Some of the activities mentioned above are as a result of suggestions made, and others are in the pipeline – such as an Art Group for older folk in one of the local houses with Sheltered Accommodation; an Arts and Crafts Group for one of the residential homes in addition to development of some of the things we already do.

Shortly, we will be having a Church Discovery Day which will capitalise on the fact there is an Art Exhibition already in church by putting up simple displays of the various activities that take place connected with our church. Also, on the first Sunday afternoon of Ricky Week we will – weather permitting – have an outside Songs of Praise to celebrate the week. If it rains, I am sure you can guess Plan B! Spread the word and invite your friends. We'll sing some old favourites, and I promise I shan't play my guitar!

To those who came along on those Saturday mornings, and those who commented separately via letter or email or conversation – thank you. It will be the work of the UC in the coming months to identify specific areas for development and encourage others, as I mentioned in the flier in the autumn, to help us 'get things going'. We have not been idle, as you can see; it is now about putting plans more fully into place and developing a working plan.

And so to the last word of the three: **Summon**

I have offered affirmation, you have shared in the process of illumination, let me now summon you. Church is about gathered community, the people of God giving voice to God's praise when together. The Church is also about dispersed community, the people of God giving voice to God's praise when dispersed and apart. All of the activities mentioned already, and all of the activities suggested last autumn need people to help put them into action so that God may be gloried and praised. So many of you are so generous in your time, perhaps though, you might like to extend your interests or develop other skills. Perhaps those of you who have not yet been able to give of your time notice that the evenings are lighter and the days somehow seem longer... and so you have more time to breathe and more time to give back to God.

God invites us to work with and for him. I extend this invitation too. If any of the activities already mentioned take your fancy, then come along, spread the word and invite others too. If any of the activities that are coming 'on stream' – to use the modern idiom – capture your imagination, then take up the challenge to be involved. As Teresa of Avila has written,

Christ has no body now but yours.

No hands, no feet on earth but yours.

Yours are eyes with which he looks with compassion on this earth.

As I wasn't here last year you have got a sort of two for the price of one. There is also much to say because there is so much that is good here and there is so much good to be done. Let us affirm one another, illuminate the way for one another and summon one another to join in so that God's people may be more fully alive – both within the church and without.

Reverend Deborah Snowball

26th April 2009