

This year's Church Giving Sunday comes at the start of a year in which we are all hoping for better things. 2020 was tough for so many people in so many ways - right across the globe. No-one's life will have been untouched by the Coronavirus Covid-19 Pandemic. We are all, to quote Her Majesty the Queen in her Christmas Message (amongst others), 'in it together'.

As a community of faith at St Mary's we have most certainly been *in it together*. We've been praying for each other - through the regular prayer requests on the pew sheet as well as concerns shared through WhatsApp Groups and the like. We've been looking out for one another - in our community of faith and far beyond: by doing shopping for others during the various Lockdowns and Shielding times, offering lifts to hospital appointments, dropping a line to someone we know lives alone, sewing masks and Scrubs Bags for people working in the NHS. We've been worshipping with each other - in church, out of church, on Zoom, from our beds. (I kid you not - you know who you are!)

We have been *in it together* as a community of faith which has both held together as the body of Christ and served the whole community through word and deed. Thank you for all that you did through 2020 - however great, however small, however seen, however unseen. Your presence as a member of the body of Christ has made a difference, perhaps without you even knowing it or realising how.

Being *in it together* is at the heart of our Gospel passage today as we have a kind of put-your-money-where-your-mouth-is moment when Jesus is kind of forced into action by his mother. (I hesitate to put an additional spin on things, but can't you just hear Mary saying-without-saying, 'If you *are* the Son of God, do something?') Is Jesus going to be just another guest, standing on the edges, even whilst knowing the disaster that is about to befall, but doing nothing? Or he is going to enter into the middle of the mess, fully embracing both his divinity and his humanity and assist in helping out as he can? Is he going to watch from the side-lines or is he going go for it, to be *in it together* with those celebrating the Wedding Feast?

Of course we know the ending. We've just heard it as we do pretty much each year: *'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory...* What if we didn't though? What if we didn't know the ending? What if all we heard was the mess of having no wine with which to slake the thirst of the guests and toast the bride and groom? It would be a fantastic cliff-hanger ending where we could cue the Eastenders' drums with glee...

We wouldn't know the stone jars were already full, yet there was still space for more water to be put into them. We wouldn't know that the wine was so exquisite that the Wine Steward asked the bridegroom why he had saved the best till last. We wouldn't know that simple, humble, life-giving water, put aside for ritual cleansing, would be turned into wine so that everyone could continue to enjoy the party. Jesus truly entered into his task - and what a way to begin: water into choice wine, party-goer into party-saver, human with divine attributes into full-on miracle worker. *'Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.* Well, wouldn't you?!

We have an opportunity to be *in it together* too. We've been *in it together* over this past year as we've sought to continue to worship and pray and support one another. We need to continue to be *in it together* as we look to the future - with our neighbours and friends, local and global - and as a church - the local church, *servicing the whole community*, local and global.

On our annual Church Giving Sunday, I always have a sense of being on a cliff-edge as I wonder what the response will be to the sermon I preach and the letter I write. I wonder if people will listen to the sermon and embrace the invitation offered to be *in it together*, with our worshipping community as well as our wider community. I wonder if people will remain by-standers, looking on at the pickle we are in financially and turn away with no real concern, rather than helping to top up what is already there so that we can have fine wine with which to serve those who come to join us and who we want to

invite to the party. I wonder if people will rejoice and celebrate and dance and sing, just as those guests will have done, because we know who provides all that we have, all that we need... we will rejoice because we know the ending and, more than that, we will want others to know the ending too. That Jesus is to be believed in.

We know we are loved. We know we have all we need. We know we have the resources with which to make a difference to the lives of other people: people in our worshipping community as well as so much farther beyond.

As I wait on my cliff edge, I wonder, too, if people will realise the not-very-well-hidden challenge, like Mary's to Jesus, *Is what I have said going to make a difference and are you going to respond?* As I wonder how each person who reads what I have written and listens to what I say will respond, I know that I have to read and listen too because, whilst I believe God has inspired what I have to say today, I know that it is a message I must hear too. I am *in it together* with you because I am a follower of Jesus, just like you and I am also prompted to respond anew each Church Giving Sunday.

The theme of this year's Church Giving Sunday is *Give my heart*. The well-loved Christmas hymn, *In the bleak mid-winter*, concludes with these words. *yet what I can I give him - give my heart*. The shepherds would have given a lamb, the wise men would have played their part but, what the speaker gives is all the greatest gift they could possibly give, their heart. It's the greatest gift any of us can give, our hearts. To give of ones heart is to give wholly, fully, unselfishly.

This year, the primary invitation is to reflect on the gifts and skills God has given you. What has God given to you and how can you use it in the service of God's kingdom. Through the wizardry of the internet – or the post – you will receive a leaflet that gives a whole range of possible actions and activities with which we want anyone and everyone to get involved. There is something for everyone, whatever your circumstance. Please, read, reflect, pray and respond. We need to fill the jar of our church to the brim and watch the exciting change that occurs when we have faith that Jesus can take the seemingly mundane and turn it into choice gift. Jesus can take you and me, all that we are and all that we bring, and bring about a kingdom of justice and peace, a community and household of faith, a people who are *in it together* and who long to bring others to be *in it together* with us as we worship Jesus, our Lord and Saviour.

Don't be bystanders. Don't stand on the edges. Bring who you are, what you are, how you are and join in with all that God has planned for such a time as this.

I close with a prayer of St Ignatius as we each take time to consider how we will respond to the call to be in it together: *Teach us, good Lord, to serve you as you deserve, to give and not to count the cost, to fight and not to heed the wounds, to toil and not to seek for rest, to labour and not to ask for any reward, save that of knowing that we do your will. Amen.*

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