

Rector's Reflection for Annual Church Meeting 28th March 2022

Last weekend marked two full years of producing weekly Sunday worship online. As I sit and write on a sunny Saturday afternoon in March, almost exactly two years ago – on another beautiful March Saturday – we'd just recorded our first digital service in church (for Mothering Sunday): in one take, warts and all, using an iPad balanced on a table and two hymn books! The sound quality was terrible and the picture juddered every time we moved from lectern to screen and back again... but we all have to start somewhere. It's funny to recall that I had more thank you messages for that service than anything else in nearly 9 years here 😊

Earlier that same week we had just managed to hold the monthly Quiz Night at St. Mary's – the very last thing we held in church before the first lockdown began and the world turned upside down. Fast forward two years and in some senses things have come full circle: we returned to an in-person Quiz Night last week and we're still recording our online services on the same iPad – only this time balanced on an ironing board in our lounge! It's amazing what you can do with a good mic and decent editing software.

Similarly, much of what we used to do BC – Before Covid – has returned. Alongside weekly in-person worship, communion is back, Children's Church is back, refreshments are back, weekly coffee mornings in church and school are back, Quiz Night and midweek groups never went away but are back in person for Lent, weddings and baptisms are back, workparties are back, World Day of Prayer is back, care home services have just re-started, schools work likewise never went away but in-person visits are back.

To this we can add some wonderful new initiatives which covid unexpectedly gave us by forcing us online: a brilliant Virtual Choir, amazing online Creative Exhibitions, and Daily Inspirations posted to the website. Over the last couple of years we've also enjoyed Crafty Church for Kids, Zoom Quiz Nights (when not in person), Zoom Kids, Zoom Sunday Coffee, a virtual Week of Guided Prayer as well as a virtual 12 hours of prayer for Thy Kingdom Come. We can even stream services now! Crises act as a petri dish for creativity.

But we must also acknowledge that, in this season of profound change, it's not a case of 'back to normal'. As people we are different: no-one lives through the last two years without changing, perhaps even in ways we hadn't noticed. And because we are all, at some level, different, it is inevitable that our community life is different: the shape of who we are and what we do is evolving. Some of what we used to do was forced to stop and we're not sure yet if and how it will return: Cafe Church, Rest, early morning worship – these are (and were) immensely valuable but may take a different shape in the time to come, or maybe something new will bubble up in its stead. In addition, although we kept both going for the first 18 months of the pandemic, we said goodbye in the early Autumn of 2021 to our older youth group and also to Rock Solid – something that was a personal joy to me fortnightly on Thursday evenings for 7 years.

So we have faced great changes, and yet there is so much to celebrate. The broad shape of our community life has shifted significantly over the last couple of years in three very encouraging ways: first, we have been delighted to welcome many newcomers in-person on Sunday mornings: more than in any previous season of my time here. To those of you reading my annual reflection for the first time: it's great to have you with us! You are most welcome 😊

Second, we have closer links with our sister church of All Saints than ever before. As most of you know, I really have two part-time jobs: as Rector of St. Mary's and as Rector of All Saints – two churches of roughly equal size 2 ½ miles apart. Whilst we have long been part of the same team, on a day-to-day basis each functions independently: its own neighbourhood to serve, its own culture, its own governance. However, the pandemic has allowed us to share at a deeper level: not just one online service for both congregations, but shared ministry – for example, the choir or the exhibitions team. You've all got used to hearing

unfamiliar voices on the online services, who now probably seem as much a part of our church family as the people we're used to seeing in-person.

Thirdly, our online congregation is here to stay. It just offers too much fruit and blessing to call it a day. Hundreds of people still watch every week – longstanding church members, friends and family spread around the country and even the world, pastoral contacts e.g. via funerals and others who live locally but who worship with us online as a way of seeing who we are. It is a lifeline for those who are housebound or clinically vulnerable, as well as offering families who are geographically spread ways to connect in worship that were never previously possible.

We've discovered that keeping a 'local' feel is a vital factor in its success: anyone who wants a 'big show' will click on any of the famous churches, and that's fine: but many more people want something that feels like the sort of church they would naturally go to, something 'for them'. That's why we're still recording on an iPad on the ironing board, and also why we pre-record. Talking direct to camera means that when you worship online the presenter is speaking to you, you're not just looking in on something that is designed for other people. It is a helpful side-benefit that pre-recording means you can watch it anytime – I'm sure *none* of you ever over-sleep on a Sunday – and also that I only have to record once!

So what does the coming year hold? Well, as I've said above, we are now a hybrid community, being church in-person and online. I want to stress, though, that we remain *one* family. Not just because I record the same Sunday sermon online as face-to-face – but because this is foundational to who we are. There is no hierarchy of membership: all of you are equally precious!

Second, we want to help all our new joiners to feel at home, make friends and find ways to get stuck in. Plus we want this to be our ongoing DNA – open to all and just as ready to welcome newcomers in the future.

Third, we want to capitalise on the great sense of energy around the place at the moment. Many people have said as much as to me recently: that buzz of excitement that something is really happening here in our midst. We give thanks to God that we have navigated this extraordinary season and not just retained but actually grown a sense of what you might call a 'bigger' vision. We are connecting with more people than ever, and we also want to look beyond our historic community to the new estates of Glebe Farm and Eagle Farm, which are growing rapidly. Oscar, Cristina and the coffee morning team are already developing friendships and investing in various ways to reach out, and in faith we want to see this flourish.

Finally I don't want to finish without extending huge thanks to the many people who continue to give unstintingly to our family. Some of you would appear several times in the lists below, so apologies in advance that I've only mentioned each of you once 😊 So: to Roger and Jonathan as our outstanding churchwardens, a huge and special thank you to Mike who is stepping down after many years of faithful service as our treasurer (and welcome to Ann-Marie!); to Ann B, Susan D, Trish, Debbie and Anthony our stewards and reps; to Philip our editing guru; to Ann H for her pastoral support; to Colin, Pam, Birgitte, Melvyn, Lisa and Lianne for their roles in leading worship (and other events!); to Ingrid, Jenny Jo B, Graham, Angela, Susan T, Elizabeth and Adrian for helping to make Sundays happen; to Christine, Jo Y, Clare, Sheila A and Gemma for coffee mornings; to Brian, Ray, Barry, Alex, Keith and Gary for their practical skills; and of course, to the wonderful Alise, who does so much more than any of you know.... and to anyone I should have mentioned: please forgive my brain blip!

If we've learnt anything from the last two years it's to accept the unknown. I'm so proud of all of you in the way that we've navigated a unique season, in such good heart and with so much life. May God continue to lead us in this coming year, and grant us grace to be good listeners – just to hear His voice is everything!