

Rector's Reflection for St. Mary's Annual Church Meeting 27th March 2023

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown". And he replied: "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way".'

This famous quote from a poem by Minnie Louise Haskins has been on my mind recently. Partly it's because as a nation we have felt in 'dark times', and not just because we've had several months of the short days of winter. Mostly it's because, in the last few years, the one constant of our lives has been rapid change. The pandemic affected us all deeply in many ways – one of those being the disorientating sense of constant changes to what we could do, where we could go, who we could see. In church, more or less every week we had to work out if we could do things as a group of 2, 6, 15, 30 or some other number; we changed how we gathered, how we socialised, how we sang, how we shared communion, and more besides. I knew many people – myself included – who for the best part of two years gave up planning anything more than a few days in advance!

So now we stand, like the poet, at the 'gate of the year': more conscious than ever that we can't see too far ahead. And maybe, just maybe, we're a bit more accepting of that than we were. I would never have chosen to learn this lesson the way that we did – and I've only partly learnt it even now – but if I've gained anything from the last two or three years, it's to live more in the present, to understand that phrase of the Lord's Prayer a little better: 'give us *today* our daily bread'. We can rightly understand this as meaning: 'give us everything we need for this day.' In other words, we're not just going to rely on what was left over from yesterday, or worry about what we'll face tomorrow, but *today* we will trust. Today we will walk with the Lord. Today we will use the resources the Lord graciously gives us, for the tasks and people the Lord has in mind for us to be occupied with.

In other words, I find myself in an awkward position as regards writing the sort of 'state of the nation' report expected at an AGM. In this season of learning to trust the Lord in the present, however much the sands may shift around us, how much can – or even should – we plan ahead? Perhaps we should simply summarise according to the lovely words of former UN Secretary General, and strong Christian, Dag Hammarskjöld: 'For all that has been, thanks; for all that is to come, yes!'

Nevertheless, I do owe it to you all to update you on the priorities I outlined in last year's reflection, and how we've been getting on with those. There were three, which we'll reprise in no particular order:

First, we noted with joy the many new people who had been joining us, and wanted to help our newcomers get more involved. I'm delighted to report that this has started to happen. We have lots of new people helping: with roles on Sunday, including refreshments, praying, reading and welcoming; as well as with attending midweek groups and helping at the Language Café and Friday Community Café.

We also *continue* to welcome many newcomers, leading to rapid growth at our in-person worship on Sundays. I did some number crunching recently, and our average weekly Sunday attendance in February over the 6-year period 2014-19 was 49. In February 2022 it was 37 (itself significantly higher than 6 months previously as we emerged from the seasons of lockdown etc); in Oct-Dec 2022 it was 54. And last month, in February 2023 it was 59. So, it has not only almost doubled in 18 months, we are now noticeably larger than we were before the pandemic – and consistently so: our lowest attendance in February was 47, our highest 74.

The growth may slow a little from this point – but this wonderful flourishing is both a joy and a responsibility. Simply put, there are more of us to journey together, and our church community needs to reflect that! I'll return to that in a moment.

Second, we wanted to capitalise on the 'energy' most of us were feeling around the place. Again, I'm delighted to see how this energy has continued over the last twelve months. Alongside the many new people we have welcomed, some significant new ministries have been birthed and existing ones revitalised. This year we've witnessed the amazing launch of our Language Classes. It began with one person, grew very quickly to become a full class and is now about to launch its second class! I'm hugely grateful to Alison and her brilliant team for pioneering something that God is really blessing. Similarly we responded rapidly to the call for more Warm Spaces to launch the Friday Community Café alongside our two existing weekly coffee mornings. Again, huge thanks to the team which has run with this. Even if it didn't generate the take-up we had hoped, it has been a real blessing to a number of people and been a vibrant and life-giving reflection of our desire to serve our community.

This year has also seen the significant growth of the school coffee morning, and the successful re-launch of our Children's Church, with a number of new children involved. Birgitte and her team began a new women's ministry and Oscar and Cristina continue their community-building work. And these ministries all continue alongside those we have offered for many years: our ongoingly popular Thursday coffee morning, Canzonetta choir, our links with St Mary's School, midweek groups, Monday morning prayer and monthly Quiz Night.

Thirdly, we wanted to emphasise our life as *one* community. As we continue offering online worship alongside in-person services and events, and we are a wonderfully diverse community, so we also have a shared identity in Christ and everyone has a part to play. This kind of vision is hard to evaluate: but the fact that so many people have connected with us over the last year suggests that we are functioning as this kind of community: a place with a real identity and heart, and also a place where people feel they can belong.

Our current growth only reinforces how important it is to retain a clear sense of being the kind of community which models 'unity in diversity'. We celebrate the fact that we have people of all ages, many cultures and all kinds of church backgrounds worshipping together. Nevertheless, our plan is, and must be, for sustainable growth. We want to see new things flourishing, which allows everyone to play their part. But we'll go at the pace we can manage, and aim to discern the God things and not just the good things. At our AGM we'll spend a bit of time thinking about becoming a community which grows in three dimensions:

- Deeper – into God
- Closer – with each other
- Further – out into the community and the wider world

I hope and pray that we will each of us aim to grow in all three dimensions – and that we as a church continue to offer ways to do that. May the Lord direct our paths: for to journey with our hand in the hand of God, 'that shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way'.

Finally, and always in hope that I don't neglect anyone (and with apologies for only mentioning each person once – some would appear several times!), my heartfelt thanks to: Roger and Jonathan our brilliant churchwardens; Ann Marie our treasurer; to Ann B, Susan D and Trish as our church stewards (and all the many ways they serve); to Colin, Birgitte, Philip G, Philip D, Melvyn, Lisa, Adrian, Lianne, Gemma, Ingrid & Jenny, Jen, Sally & Roger F, Clare, Ann H, Jocelyn, Lola, Julia, Mike, Sheila A, Elizabeth, Christine, Brian, Oscar, Cristina, Ray, Jo B, Graham, Angela, Jean R and all who've faithfully served on Sundays; to Alison, Leslie, Susan R, Pam, Debbie, Jo Phil & Emily Y, Susan T, Sheila E, Anthony, Tom, Liz, Cliff, Rosalind, Margaret, Brenda, Jane, Diana, Cali, Jonty, Keith H, Barry, Gary and Robin for their practical skills and support; and of course, to Alise, who keeps me sane and bails me out more often than most people realise!

One last thank you: to Fr Keith, who made an immense contribution to our church life in the five years up to the pandemic. The turmoil of the last three years made it hard for us to arrange a proper chance to say thank you for all that Keith and Chris have given to our community, and this note is only a partial reparation for that. I know we remain in their prayers, as they do in ours.

MJT, March 2023