

## Rector's Report to St Nicholas APCM April 2021.

Since our annual parochial church meeting for 2020 was just over 6 months ago, I don't want to spend much time reflecting over the course of the last few months. But let me simply acknowledge something we all know: we are living in difficult times. The disease itself, the fear it has induced and the restrictions that have hampered our lives and gatherings have all had a profound impact on us. We've missed being together and we've suffered in our spiritual lives by not meeting together.

As far fewer people have been gathering in church worship, the burden of the work Sunday by Sunday has fallen on fewer and fewer people. Very often, the same few people have been leading our sung worship, and the same few people have been acting as welcomers and stewards. Out of camera shot, Paul has been running the live streaming pretty much every single Sunday, while Edward or Anthony have been running the sound and PowerPoint. To that small group of people, and those who have been faithfully opening the church for private prayer or keeping it clean and tidy, I give you, we give you, our heartfelt thanks.

But before I spend a few moments looking forward I want to look back. Not over the last year or so but over the last 10 years. As you will have noted from my last 2 newsletters, at the start of May I will have been here for 10 years. And as is often the way at that notable anniversaries, it's good to look back and take stock so we can learn some lessons and praise God for his blessings.

Because there is plenty to thank God for. Over the last 10 years the church building here at St Nicholas has been transformed, not just in the last major refurbishment but in smaller changes earlier on in the process. Our finances are in a far better state now than they were 10 years ago. The church family is larger and younger than it was 10 years ago. We have more home groups now than we did 10 years ago. We give more money away now than we did 10 years ago. And although I don't have accurate data to back it up, from my own observations and conversations I would say that we are more grounded in God's Word now than we were 10 years ago, both in terms of what we do on Sundays and in personal devotions throughout the week, and that many of us are more mature in our faith now than we were 10 years ago. Over that time, we have also seen a steady trickle of people coming to faith in Jesus and others reconnecting with the faith long forgotten. It's taken a lot of hard work from a lot of people working together, and all that's been achieved has been due to the grace of God and it's right we thank him for his mercy and goodness to us.

But as I began to look back over these 10 years, I've also been struck by my failures as your pastor. And I want to share some of those things with you now, not that you might come and pat me on the back and say the opposite, but so you might be encouraged to pray for me, and to pray for us as a church, that we might become a church that is totally reliant on God and so truly live and work for his praise and glory.

I take lots of funerals, and these days funerals come with popular music. Vera Lynn singing We'll meet again; Angels, by Robbie Williams, Somewhere over the rainbow, even YMCA. I can cope with most of those songs but one I really dislike is My Way by Frank Sinatra. It's not his voice or the music that is the problem, I like the old crooners. It's the sentiment of the lyrics that's the problem because it tells the story of a life lived entirely for one's self and by one's self. And of course, that is the natural disposition of mankind. Not content to be made in God's image we want to be God and rule instead of him.

Now that can't be the case for the Christian. We don't seek to live our way but his way. We don't seek to live in our own strength but by God's strength. But as I've looked back over the last 10 years I've been struck and humbled by the presence of this same kind of self-reliant attitude in me. Not that the Lord hasn't been involved in the work of the church, of course he has. But too often I as the pastor, I've operated as if God was my mascot rather than my captain, as if I were the driver, and not him; and so often I've tried to do the right things in my own strength, whilst ignoring his strength and gifts at my disposal.

I know I've been arrogant. Part of me imagined that there was an endpoint to which I alone could bring the church to make it large and healthy and strong. How arrogant to think that I was anything more than a steward of this ancient church family, and one on a temporary contract at that.

I know that I've been self-reliant. In my practice, if not in my doctrine, I have behaved as if I had the energy and the skills to build God's church. I have worked hard, I have put the hours in, so much has been all me.

I've been impatient. I know there have been some decisions that we rushed into, so eager was I to make a difference and to have the right strategies in place.

I've been too project-oriented, I confess that too. The work on the building has been truly marvellous, but this structure is not the church. People are the church. And disciples need to be nurtured, encouraged, visited – and I haven't done enough of that.

And there are times when I've been fearful. You may think that the Sunday sermons are often blunt because I haven't shied away from teaching on difficult or controversial topics or speaking about sin and hell, but I know there are times when I haven't said what needed to be said, when I haven't been clearer and bolder, particularly in 1 on 1 conversations and have failed to challenge people over their thinking and behaviour, because I wanted people to like me and not be offended.

And perhaps more egregiously of all, for most of the last 9 ½ years, my personal walk with the Lord has been characterised by a pitifully poor prayer life which has led, I'm sure, to many of these other sins and failings.

Whilst I am thankful that the Lord has helped me to see myself better, I'm grieved by the fact that it's taken 10 years to do it. Because over these 10 years, hundreds of people have come through those doors and not been challenged or encouraged or rebuked or helped and supported as they might have been because for those 9 ½ years I've been relying on my own strength, my own wisdom and my own talents and energies, rather than on the strength of the Lord.

Only the Lord will know the impact of my failings and what might have been otherwise, but I want to be open about those things so that you will pray for me that I might change and be the pastor you need and that God has called me to be. But also, I want to be open about my failings so that we might pray together, and repent of our corporate failings so that, with God's divine power we might grow into the church God has called us to be.

At our last APCM as we gave thanks for our new building, and I presented our new Mission Action Plan which spoke of our desire that this church would be a place of welcome for all in the community, a place of worship, discipleship and learning, and a base camp for mission out in the parish and the world. There are a lot of good ideas in here, lots of practical suggestions, programs, events and structures to put in place to make those happen. And in our own strength, and by own efforts, we could do much of it and appear to be a busy, active, welcoming church. But I don't want us to appear to be anything. I want us to be a church that is utterly reliant on God in prayer because we have realised that by our own strength, we can do nothing of any eternal value. Whatever happens in the years ahead it has got to be fuelled by prayer and an increasing reliance on God's power or it be of no eternal value.

So what must we do?

After a year and more of not meeting together, we need to rebuild our community and rebuild relationships that have been distanced by time and fear. That will take time and effort, and a show of hospitality the like of which we have never known before. We can't do that in our own strength.

After a year or more where our opportunities to share the gospel have been severely limited, we need the Spirit of God to work in us to truly convict us of the truth of the gospel and of the needs of the world, and

then to equip us for evangelism so that people hear the gospel, believe the gospel and are saved from hell and brought to a living faith in Jesus. We can't do that in our own strength.

After a year or more when usual programmes have been hindered, we need to be much better at making mature disciples, building one another up, so the truths you hear declared Sunday by Sunday sink into all our lives and change the way we live. That spiritual growth relies on the power of the Holy Spirit and so we make mature disciples in our own strength.

And living in a part of our town which has huge numbers of young families, we need to invest seriously in our work with children and young people. To do that well will involve huge financial sacrifice, around £20,000 extra in giving every year on an ongoing basis. Many of you gave sacrificially for our building project. Some of you are still fulfilling your pledges. This kind of giving will only happen by the power of the Holy Spirit working in our hearts so we want to invest our money and resources in building God's kingdom rather than living for now. And however many appeals I make, however clever or touching those appeals might be, that doesn't happen in our own strength.

Only a move of the Holy Spirit can touch hearts and lives and bring about these changes. Only a greater desire for God and his glory will stir us to want to play our part in his kingdom, and as you've heard in recent weeks, we have a desperate need for volunteers to serve in a range of ways. And if we want God's kingdom to grow here, if we want the Holy Spirit to move in us and through us, then we need to pray.

Every remarkable move of God in the book of Acts was preceded by prayer. Every remarkable move of God in the history of the church has been preceded by prayer. And whilst we have, of course, prayed sporadically, I haven't prayed enough and as a church we haven't prayed enough. And so my plea for this coming year is that we commit ourselves to pray. Will you do that?

Will you commit yourself to pray on your own, daily, that the truth you're reading in God's Word would settle in your heart, change your life, and that God would give you the courage to share the good news of Jesus with others?

Will you commit yourself to pray together in your home groups, not just for one another's problems, but for a spiritual awakening, for a greater hunger for God, for the conviction of sin, for the power to live holy lives, and for God's glory and power to be seen in our midst?

Will you commit yourself to join with others to pray together? Can you get up to pray early on Tuesday mornings? Might you give up a relaxing night at home to join with us and pray together on Friday nights late into the evening? Will you commit yourselves, not just once in a while but month after month, to join our monthly prayer gatherings and pray together for God's work here, in our town and across the world, that people would be brought to Jesus?

For as long as the Lord calls us to be here, I'll continue to work hard and do my best to preach the scriptures faithfully week by week, but I will also be praying more, much more. That's my commitment to you. With God's help I want to be his humble, faithful servant, to be fully God-reliant, not self-reliant; to be God fearing, not man fearing; and people focused, not project oriented.

And I'm sure, as we wait upon the Lord, as we root ourselves in Jesus the true vine, then God will hear our prayers us and come down amongst by his Spirit and bless us in a new way. Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus.