

Team Rector's Report: 25th October 2020

Reading: 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family. And those whom he predestined he also called; and those whom he called he also justified; and those whom he justified he also glorified.

What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?' (*Romans 8:28-30*).

Prayer: Almighty and everlasting God,
increase in us your gift of faith
that, forsaking what lies behind
and reaching out to that which is before,
we may run the way of your commandments
and win the crown of everlasting joy;
through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever. Amen. (*Collect for Trinity 18*)

Thank You

I would like to start today with a big thank you to Ken Parsons. Staying on as Churchwarden is above and beyond the call of duty and we are all extremely grateful to him. He, and Jo, have done a marvellous job, been a great support and worked very hard to ensure our Church could reopen when that was permitted. Indeed, I have to say from a purely personal point of view I am particularly glad he is staying on.

I should, though, add a note of caution to us all. What does it say about us as a Church that we are unable to find someone else to take on some of this commitment and responsibility? What are we doing to ask ourselves what calling to ministry each Church member has?

There are two other important thank yous we should make. The first is to Philip Jones who, after 44 years of leading worship and preaching, has decided not to renew his licence as an LLM. He has made a great contribution to our life here at St Laurence and to other churches in the Team and we are most indebted to him for it. The other is to Valerie Ekins who has been arranging the flowers in Church over 40 years and co-ordinating the rota for much of that time - which is a truly amazing record - and is now standing down. Alongside her we thank Joan Truscott, who for a number of years has faithfully assisted Valerie with this task and is also standing down. They have both served with dedication and flair. Their contributions have been greatly appreciated and will be missed.

This Year - and Looking Forward

As we all know, this has been a most extraordinary year - and one which puts everything we did before into sharp perspective. In a very real sense, there is the Church as we were before the pandemic, and the Church as we go forward today.

This has been a seminal time for us. We have had our worship here in Church stopped entirely and, since we have resumed, in a very different form. On the other hand, we have discovered the opportunities of online communications. We have been unable to

socialise but there has been a big increase in neighbourliness and practical concern. Being local matters more in many ways and yet we are reaching those well beyond our boundaries.

We don't know what the immediate future holds but we can be sure that simply going back to what we had before is not going to happen. In addition, we can see some of the longer-term implications. The reason for this is two closely related factors. The pandemic has hit Church finances hard and in doing so has brought to a head already existing problems that, frankly, we have been doing our best to ignore for too long. Alongside this the number of full-time stipendiary clergy continues to fall. Under the heading 'Beyond the Present' the diocese is exploring with the deaneries and parishes the consequences of this and the proper way forward for us in these times.

What does that mean for us here in this parish and Team? Well, it is certain that our pattern of services will need to evolve and the way we organise our ministry will change. Earlier this year we lost Rev. Canon Bill Rogers, who has moved with his family to Cockermouth. He was a much-valued member of our team and will be much missed. Also it is no secret that I am moving towards retirement and, as things stand, I consider it unlikely that I will be replaced by a fulltime stipendiary priest.

All this is not necessarily bad. Nearly twenty years ago when we first came to Downton it looked as if the Church was discovering - or perhaps rediscovering - a less centralised more lay-centred ministry. Perhaps God is using this situation to nudge us into embracing these new ways that we have been resisting. We don't like change. The great temptation always is to look back, to focus on what we had, and spend our time regretting its loss. However that is not what the Church is for, what we are called to do. Rather we are to focus on Christ, listen to him, and look forward in him. We must preserve only what is best from the past, acknowledge the realities of today and let God work through us for a better tomorrow.

We don't know quite where this will lead us. What truly matters, though, is whether we are going where God wants us to be. We must look forward, opening our hearts and minds to God and his will for us - asking what sort of Church is he calling us to be, what does it mean to be his people here, and what does that require of us today?

Hope

As Christians we are a people of hope - hope in God. 'Hope does not disappoint us,' Paul tells us 'because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us' (*Romans 5:5*). God holds all things in his hand and is working out our salvation. God is at work here; he is with us. We can have confidence in him - and pray for his wisdom and a renewed vision in our ministry and our outreach to the village.

As St Paul writes to the Philippians:

'This one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind' (*Philippians 3:13-14*).