

## Vicar's Report to the APCM, 2017

Putting together my own contribution to the report of the work of this parish that we present to the Annual Parochial Church Meeting is always a bit of a tricky balancing act. I don't want to go on for very long – a friend of mine moving from one parish where he was expected to give a 'state of the union' address, to another, told me that when he did the same in his new parish, he saw the people's eyes glazing over before he'd got to the end of the first paragraph. I hope I will err on the side of brevity. But it's also tricky knowing how much to dwell on what has happened in the past year, and how much for focus on what is happening now and how things might develop in the future. Here, my task is made incomparable easier by the reports that have been put together by the people who are actually doing the stuff – our groups, housegroups, committees and so on. These reports are laid out in the fourteen page document that is available both in hard copy and on our website for you all to read. It's my happy duty to thank all those who have taken the trouble to write these reports, and for the active role that so many play in the life and witness of this parish, both within our church family, and outside it. I'm not going to repeat what is already there in black and white. What I do want to draw from this account for of 2016, is what pointers are there for our future, as we move into a time of radical change for our parish and for the parish of Eynesbury. I'll come back to that in a moment as there are two things that I do need to say about the year ended 31 December 2016.

The first of these obligations is a happy one. Everyone loves the curate, said Canon Sarah Coakley in her sermon at Eleanor's ordination in the cathedral, and I think it is true to say that everyone loved Eleanor and many of us benefited richly from her unfailingly bright, inventive and cheerful presence as a deacon and priest in this parish. Some curates come needing a lot of help and support – others come more fully formed. Eleanor was definitely of the second category, and it was evident to me from very early on that here was someone who would be snapped up by a parish very quickly when the time came for her to move on. We'd have loved her to stay for at least part of her third year, but Soham's need was great. I hear that good things are happening there, and I'm not at all surprised. We were very lucky to have her, not least for the largely unseen, but important work that she did in getting Love's Farm House up and running, providing the community facility that was so desperately needed, and that provides the base for Helene's work with the very successful Breakfast Church.

The second glance into the past is not so happy. Philip Barrett will give a fuller account of our finances in the meeting following this service. All I need to say while everyone is here, is that our financial position is far from good. Year on year, without extravagance, we are spending beyond our income, which itself is actually declining in real terms. Ministry and running costs of course, are not declining, and difficult decisions will have to be taken if giving does not increase and income to cover our costs is not found. Only saying – as they say.

On a positive note, two groups were convened to formulate a response to the diocesan Ely 2025 strategy, and to put together our development action plan, copies of which were distributed at the time and are still available – again on the website as well as in hard copy. I'm grateful to Judy Ruff and Ann Williams for convening and coordinating the groups, and to Christian Laughton and Philip Barrett for taking some of the suggestions forward. Lots of things came out of these discussions, and Judy has written up a full account in the annual

report. I want to focus on two areas of activity that I think are particularly important and which we want to move forward in the coming year.

The diocese rightly prioritises the nurturing and encouraging of a confident people of God. An important part of being confident in our faith, is to learn and to be active in prayer – in fact to make prayer such a habit, that we pray constantly as St Paul encourages us to. This is something that we find quite hard, but in essence is quite simple. Prayer does not always have to involve the use of words and I hope to bring some of the fruits of my own research done on sabbatical last summer, to bear in the more frequent provision of space in which to learn to pray in stillness and in quiet. Starting on June 18th, we will set aside a Sunday afternoon each month to create a sacred space, using the buildings and grounds that we have, to enable this to happen. More details to follow. Before that, we will take part in ‘Thy Kingdom Come’ – nine days of prayer between Ascension Day and Pentecost. We would like to set up some prayer stations around the church – perhaps outside as well – arrangements of objects, pictures, words – whatever you like that provide a theme for prayer. When I say ‘we’ in this context, it won’t happen without you! Perhaps you are part of a group that might like to think about putting a prayer station together. Ask me or Ann for more details. It doesn’t have to be complicated – less is more. It will all culminate in a Churches Together Songs of Praise on 4 June, for which we will want to have your choice of hymns.

The other big area is making and maintaining contact with those families who bring their children for baptism, and then drop off the radar. Research commissioned by the Church of England suggests that these families, often with little or no previous experience of church, are well disposed to what we do in church, but are unconfident about joining in. They’d love to keep in touch, even if their circumstances don’t enable them to come regularly on Sundays. Given the numbers involved, the ministry team can’t do this on our own. Baptism is one of the primary sacraments of the whole church, the way in which Jesus himself commanded his disciples to make new disciples. We, again meaning all of us, need to own more of the process and be more involved in accompanying these families on their own hesitant journeys of faith. So in the coming year, we’ll be asking for your help, your involvement. We’ve begun in a small way by presenting parents with a small box of card which we ask you to write on to show that the congregation is praying for our newly baptised – and I hope that you do pray for them! But personal contact is the key – someone to befriend – to be at the service itself, and to follow up afterwards – to show them that we care – because we must and do care, as Christ cares. All generations can do this and training and advice will be given.

Exploration in prayer, and encouraging new Christians. Just two ways – not complicated – in which we can move forward in our strategic vision for the parish.

I said earlier that we are about to enter a time of profound and radical change. As you may know, our lovely friends and colleagues at Eyensbury, Debbie and Jesse with Aidan, will be leaving us in July to move to Montreal, where Jesse is to be the principal of a theological college. We always knew that this would happen. They’ve been here for nearly five years, and in that time, Debbie has done wonderful work with the congregation at Eynesbury and in the community. In that time the parish has increased its giving, and the amount that they pay in deanery share, towards the cost of ministry. However it is clear that the overall contribution of our two parishes does not cover the cost of two full time parish priests. Discussions about the future have begun – in Eynesbury at parish level, and at deanery and

diocesan level. At this precise moment, I cannot tell you exactly what the future looks like for our two parishes. Two things are clear though. Firstly when the details are worked out, St Neots and Eynesbury will be constituted as a team or joint benefice of our two parishes. Secondly, Debbie will not be replaced with a full-time stipendiary ordained minister. Beyond that, there will be a lot to discuss about what exactly should happen. Effectively, the church on this side of the river, with both churches maintaining their liturgical traditions, will be one administrative unit, ministering to a population that we conservatively estimate at more than twenty thousand people. As you will appreciate, that has implications not just for Eynesbury, but for all of us. It will be a demanding task, and it will take a fair bit of setting up, legally as well as pastorally. Yet we should not lose heart. God does not abandon his church. He loves and resources us. But he also encourages us to begin to embrace new ways of thinking about how we do church, and what church looks like in 2018 and beyond. 'As it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be', is not an option. Neither is expecting professional ordained ministers to cope with everything. Both of those are strategies for managed decline, and you don't have to read very far into the Diocesan strategy, to find that decline is not on the agenda. We come back to nurturing a confident people of God – a people of God, who don't just come to church as something that will always be there when you want it – rather, a people of God who come together to be constituted as the Body of Christ – to be resourced to take active roles in the church and its life, because without that, we will flounder. You do not come to church – you come to be the church. When you collectively are not here, there is no church – when you as individuals are not here, the church is incomplete. We all need to think and to pray, and then actively to seek out the ways in which we can use our time and our talents, not just to keep the show on the road in St Neots Parish Church, but to respond to Jesus's instruction to make new disciples and to grow the church here and in Eynesbury.

In our gospel reading today, the very well-known story of the encounter with the risen Lord Jesus on the road to Emmaus, two disciples come together to travel to the village a few miles outside Jerusalem. They are dejected and confused – they cannot make any sense of what they have seen, nor of the rumours that the tomb of Jesus, whom they know to have been crucified, has been found empty, and that some have even claimed to have seen him alive. They are travelling together – bound up in their own thoughts and confusion – together but essentially alone – isolated – alienated – self-absorbed.

Then they are joined by a stranger whom they do not recognise, and who while journeying with them, opens up the scriptures – unfolds for them the developing story of God's purposes for creation – culminating in God's indwelling his own creation – Christ the eternal word, taking human form but not grasping at equality with God. Instead, he humbled himself, taking the form of a servant, taking that self-denying humility to its furthest point in accepting death on a cross. All out of pure, self-emptying love, for it was through God doing that in Jesus, that death itself could not hold him, and so will not hold us. That in concentrated form is the story of salvation.

We know that it is Christ himself, who leads and guides them through the scriptures but as yet, they still fail to recognise him. It is when they sit down to eat and the stranger takes, blesses, breaks and shares the bread, mirroring his actions at the Last Supper, that our two disciples realise that it is Jesus – Christ is in their midst in the breaking of bread – and their only impulse now is to go and tell, as they are propelled out, sent out, to proclaim the resurrection to their companions back in Jerusalem. They have no idea what the future has in store, but they can now face whatever the future holds, not as atomised, isolated

individuals, but as the Body of Christ – unified, bonded, rooted in the presence of Christ that they now realise will always be with them.

That my friends, is what Eucharist is all about. The Emmaus road story is our story, then, now, always and forever. Today, as we do week by week, or day by day, we have come together with whatever personal concerns, joys, worries, sadnesses, drive us into ourselves. We have journeyed together for a while. We have encountered Christ's real presence in the reading and opening of the scriptures and in a few moments we will encounter Jesus again as we take bread, bless it, break it and share it. Moreover, we encounter him in ourselves, in one another – gathered and equipped to be the Body of Christ in the world. It is that presence of the risen Christ in each other, that we acknowledge when we share the peace together. And most importantly, like those two disciples on the way to Emmaus, we are sent out to go and tell, go and live, go and be – knowing that the Christ that we encounter here, is the image of God, the presence of God implanted in us, resourcing and enabling us at every point.

Like those two disciples, we do not yet know what the future will look like for St Neots and Eynesbury as we embark on a new stage in our journey together. But whatever shape our ministry and our worship takes, we know that God is with us in the Christ revealed in word and sacrament, through the grace of the Holy Spirit. And we should not be afraid.

Alleluia, Christ is risen!