

Vicar's Bulletin April 2010

(closing remarks from APCM)

It is always interesting to look back over predictions from previous year and see what has happened. Reading my closing remarks from last year was just such a moment. I suggested we were in a comfortable position – particularly financially. Little did I know just how big a change would be coming in that area both positive & negative, a major drop in regular giving but also some significant legacies which mean that instead of contracting we can actually be more strategic. I also talked about transforming church and as a PCC we have indeed been looking at how we work as a church to see if we need to alter anything. We have done a few tweaks around committees, we have changed from a Youth Minister to a Youth & Children's Minister to spread our resources. Also we have agreed to invest in adults as well, around the rooting people into regular worship and small groups. This will need more work on it to pin down the exact working out but one of the difficulties we have identified is linked to one of our strengths. Boldmere has always been an area of regular turn over in people moving in and out of the area. Thus we have seen our fair share of people move to follow jobs or family. Although we have lost some good people we also have seen new people turning up and trying us out. What is good is that the feedback is that our front door is seen as open and so people feel welcomed and accepted. However our back door is also open and so many of these people stay on the fringes. The PCC has recognised that we need to do something about this. The diocese is doing a conference around this area in the beginning of July and we will be taking a group to maximise the benefits.

I talked last year about spending some time basing our teaching around the person of the Holy Spirit. This was a very fruitful time and coupled with a group going to New Wine has resulted in an extra service once a month now entitled Prayer & Praise, as well as a trained prayer ministry team. I continue to feel that a real strength of St. Michaels is the variety of worship we offer from BCP through to very informal and also that we can come together in unity as we did on Palm Sunday. This diversity and unity takes energy but is well worth it.

So if those are some reflections on reading last year's remarks what about looking forward. I made a comment in the PCC report in the booklet that it had been a quiet year and then listed all the personnel changes. I concluded that maybe it hadn't been so quiet after all. As I look forward I see more personnel changes, additions and losses. Margaret is now at that stage of chatting to the Bishops regarding a move. Do pray for her and Darrell about this important next step and as she is unlikely to be around next year I want to take this opportunity to thank her for all that she has and is giving to St. Michaels in her gifts and her person. We have benefitted greatly from her time here. Also thanks go to Darrell – for what he has brought to St. Michaels and also for his patience as it is never easy being the clergy partner.

On the additions side – I have mentioned a new Youth & Children's Minister. Also Elaine Riley is in training for readership as are Trudy & Edwina for the Pastoral team. There are various other people in the wings that we need to discern with them their calling to contribute in different ways to the ministry of St. Michaels and the wider church. Do prayerfully consider where God might be calling you and then check it out with the various leaders concerned. So more changes on the horizon and this makes it harder to discern the future. Also a few things on the horizon add to the uncertainty.

The first thing is Ash! I have been very struck by the past week and how many people had great plans that have just had to be shelved because of a volcano in Iceland. From key leaders in the world to people coming back from holiday, the effect has been universal. This for me has highlighted the way something seemingly smaller and away from us has the ability to affect all of us. There are then two things in coming months that could do precisely this.

The first is the election. I am not about advocating a particular party but the one thing they have in common is that they recognise that the next parliamentary term will be a difficult one in terms of finance and cuts. We cannot stay where we are but the details are far from clear and the results even further from being assured. Many of our congregation work in the public sector and so like last year we could find our giving majorly affected.

Also the wider implication for the whole country is even more uncertain. Clergy have been told that to get the pension they have been promised they will now need to work longer and contribute and it won't start until we are 68. This is no different to many many other people across different jobs. It is just another sign of a changing economic situation and where it will be in a year or two years is frankly guess work.

The second event in the next few months is in July. It will be General Synod, the last before new elections. The topic that therefore is dominating the agenda is Women Bishops. Whilst it seems clear that legislation will be passed to allow for Women bishops, it is not yet clear what provision will be made for those that object. Added into this pot is the Pope's invitation for Anglicans who object to set up the equivalent of a diocese within the Roman Catholic Church and we have interesting times. Forward in Faith, one of the main groups that object, have not made it clear how they will jump. In some other countries there has been a sizeable jump for the Pope's offer. Here they are waiting to see what happens in July and even then it may not be clear. Because the offer is around not just clergy but congregations as well, it will affect the church of England but we don't know how deeply. Some dioceses may only see a small number change and a simple redrawing of boundaries may still keep us as covering the whole country.

However some dioceses have a sizeable number of people unhappy and any vote is likely to firstly split congregations, then dioceses and may even affect the deployment of clergy across the country as well as redrawing of parish boundaries. We simply don't know. There will be a Churches Together evening around this topic in June – watch out for more details.

Whatever the outcome of the elections and synod the future is amber but whether that means red is to follow or green is not so clear. Normally I have a sense of direction as I come to APCM's but I have to say I don't at this point. Some things are clear, like investing in certain areas, like strengthening our worship, like thinking about a theme for next year. But vision, big ideas, these seem obscured and probably for good reason.

Coincidentally I am taking a study leave this year. It means I will not be around September, October, & November. All the various things will keep going as they should never be dependent on one person. Appropriate provision will be put in place. These three months will give me time to reflect on discipleship – my own and how to enable others in the coming decade. I am not predicting any flashes of genius but equally I will be spending time in prayer and study and chatting with others to enable us all. Uncertainty is never a comfortable place and that is where we are as individuals, families, communities and as a church. What is comfortable is resting in that peace beyond understanding – Jesus Christ.

The thought I offer to myself, and to all of us, is maybe that is the direction for the next twelve months – to be uncomfortable that we might trust more in the comfort of God. Comfort literally means with strength and it is only in God's strength can we truly find peace. I offer you a verse from Acts 9 – if we had continued reading yesterday we would have heard:

31 Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace and was strengthened. Living in the fear of the Lord and encouraged by the Holy Spirit, it increased in numbers.

Let us live in fear not of volcanoes or economic situations or any other uncertainty but live in the fear of the Lord. And let us not put our trust in worldly things or our own strength but let us be encouraged by the Holy Spirit. And always we pray that God kingdom is extended in us and through us.

Transforming Church Prayer

Sovereign God, in Christ you make all things new.

Clothe us with power from on high,

that with generous lives and hearts on fire,

we might work with you to grow your church

and transform your world.

To you be glory through Jesus our Lord. Amen.