

APCM 2015/2016 St James' Church, Devizes

Vicar's Report, Rev Dr Keith Brindle

I want to start by saying thank you. There is a problem with saying thank you on such occasions; the list of people that deserve thanks for all they have done is long and it is easy to unintentionally miss someone out: I know, I managed to completely skip the bit in my speech where I thanked my mum and my side of the family on my wedding day!

So this is what I am going to do:

First, I wish to thank you all for the part you have played here at St James.' You give in so many ways to the ministry of this church. Thank you.

Since your last APCM, you have successfully worked together during an unexpected vacancy, during which time many of you took on greater church commitments. If you are one such person, thank you. As your new vicar it is a real blessing to step into a post where the church is functioning and faithfully focussed on serving God and one another.

Secondly there are a few people I do want to acknowledge and thank.

In her absence I want to thank Beth, who, with great humility and her many talents, has supported this church in many ways, some obvious, as our Director of choir music, but most unseen.

I want to thank Jennifer. Jennifer has a huge heart for this church, this community and for ministering to us all. Those who were at Erica Harris' funeral on Wednesday will have seen that first hand. Thank you.

I want to thank Becky for her work with young people and their families. Becky has huge integrity and a real longing for wanting people to claim faith as their own and to grow as Christians. Much of what is distinctive and attractive about how we do church at St James is down to Becky.

I want to thank Clare as she enters her final year as a church warden. Thank you Clare for all the hours you have spent supporting this church; not least the administrative and leadership load you have carried during the vacancy and in supporting me.

I want to thank Jeremy for his time as a church warden, again recognising all he did during the vacancy; and since then in helping with the recruitment of our new administrator, Angela, sorting our temporary fix for a choirmaster, and for being a local supply of decent coffee and chat to the vicar. We have a small token of our thanks for your time as a church warden.

To finish off this bit, I want to encourage you all to go and thank someone. It may be for the help they have been to you or in recognition for what they have done to support the church.

We most closely echo the encouraging heart of God when we thank and affirm someone for what they have done and who they have been. Our spirits are lifted when we are thanked and recognised for the bit we do.

Now to the future of St James.

Some of you know that I am a keen cyclist.

Leading a church successfully is like riding a bike in a race.

A professional cyclist, like Chris Frome, always looks ahead, towards what is coming. They may be here on the road, but their focus is there. This isn't because the roads that professional cyclists race on are perfectly smooth, without potholes or dodgy surfaces. The Tour de France is raced on normal roads. A professional cyclist, looking always to the road ahead, sees the pothole, sees the scree on the sharp bend, sees the opportunity to win the race, well before they arrive at them. They have a clear vision, to win the race; and in pursuit of their vision, they look to the road ahead to decide the best course of action to take.

As a church the ground beneath us will never be perfectly smooth, but that shouldn't distract us from looking at the road ahead. We are broken, imperfect people; but that shouldn't distract us from the mission that God has called us to.

We need to look to at the road ahead. We need to see what lies ahead and decide before we arrive there what is the best course of action to take based on a clear Christian vision. To use the phrase the Bishop used at my installation, we need to discern the mind of Christ for this church, for this place, for this time. The bishop was right when he said the easier task would be to knock out sermons week-in week-out; whilst the harder task is to discern the mind of Christ. That phrase, the mind of Christ, comes from 1 Corinthians Chapter 2 in which 'the mind of Christ that is in us' is planted by the Holy Spirit. Verse 12 reads 'What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may understand what God has freely given us.' As we look to the future, we do so prayerfully and guided by the Holy Spirit.

I want to end by painting a picture for you of St James'. It is St James' in the not-to-distant-future; what lies further down the road. To paint this picture I have used 3 different brushes; the first brush is where we are now, the 2nd are the demographic statistics for our neighbourhood and the finally brush is a recent series of Church of England reports on Church Growth.

Here's what the future looks like in this picture:

Because we have a clear outward mission we are a growing church. We are growing in 3 ways; we are growing in numbers (more people come to our services), we are growing in

depth (people are growing in discipleship) and we are growing in our involvement in the world beyond these four walls.

We have two Sunday morning services that are flourishing. The early morning service is traditional, without being stuffy. The mid-morning service is informal, lively, with a contemporary feel.

Both our congregations have grown because we are a welcoming, encouraging, relational and caring church that teaches and shares the Good News of Jesus Christ with confidence; yet without judgement or condemnation; we trust God enough to leave the judgement stuff to His authority.

We do fewer things than we once did, and though offloading some stuff was difficult for some, the things we now do we do really well, with consistency and a clear Christian vision. Because we have a 'let's give it a go' mentality we have been willing to change what is no longer fit for the purpose of bringing God's Kingdom into the lives of others.

We recognised early on that church growth is found where there is a high ratio of children to adults and so we have continued to invest in programmes for the youngest amongst us. As a result our work with toddlers, children, young people and their families is flourishing. As is our involvement in the local schools. Though we nurture the discipleship and vocation of all at St James, we celebrate that our young people are involved in every level of our church life.

There are threats and dangers; the road beneath us is never smooth and we can easily fall. Because we are imperfect followers of Christ, because we have different opinions and preferences, there is usually some kind of conflict going on. This is normal for such a big family and it is a good thing. Because here at St James we do conflict really well. How we reconcile our conflicts, how we live with differences, is one of the most attractive expressions of our faith to those on the outside. The reconciling love of God, expressed in the action of the cross, unites us strongly.

Though we love to worship God at St James' on Sundays, and though the worship is really really good and the teaching scratches where we are itching, we are a church with an outward missional focus. We recognise that Sunday nourishes and sustains us, so we can do the more important stuff we do Monday through to Saturday. We do this both collectively and as individuals.

Collectively, through initiatives such as The Noise, Christians Against Poverty and the work of our LPAs, etc, we work together to bring about God's Kingdom into the lives of those around us. We openly share the hope we have in Christ with those that come to us to share the big transitions of their lives; their births, their weddings and their funerals. At these times, as at other times, we are good listeners.

As individuals, in so many different ways, we share the love of Christ with our friends and families. This is our greatest mission, to those we already know and love. And St James gives us the support, especially through our Connect Groups, the teaching, the tools, the encouragement and the confidence to talk about Jesus. And we do it because of what Christ has already done for us on the cross. We respond in love to the abundant love we have received. We don't talk about church growth; we talk about our friends and our families finding hope, finding acceptance, finding forgiveness, finding the satisfaction that is the love of Jesus Christ. Because of all this we tithe our time, energy, money and creativity to the work of St James' and the mission we have been called to. And we pray for one another.

Some of what I have painted isn't the future, but the current reality. We are already on this road.

The Holy Spirit is sensitive to who we are and how we tick. What the spirit has placed in me, is what I most need; an enthusiasm, a desire, a love for St James'. And I don't mean the building. I know it sounds unpolished, but I simply love my job. What's not to love? I am excited about the years ahead; working with the church wardens Clare and Paul, with the PCC, with Jennifer, Steve, Becky and Angela and with all of you here at St James to see what God has in store for us as we focus on the road ahead.