

(John 15: 11-17)

It's often said that the Church of England is a 'broad church.' So often has this phrase been used, that it's entered into general usage- of political parties, and of groups and institutions of all types. We are a broad church. Why do people come into church? Attend a service? Or a social event? Why do you come to church? Perhaps for some quiet contemplation, and just to get some peace! Maybe to enjoy the beauty of a building- particularly, perhaps, an ancient building such as a cathedral. Perhaps you're a music lover, or a hymn singer? It could be that you like meeting friends in what has been recently described of our community area as a 'safe place'- not just the building of course, but the conversation and activities (which, incidentally, is why Safeguarding is so important, and needs to be 'owned' by us all).

All of these reasons are good, but let me suggest that primarily, we are a *spiritual* family. Specifically, we are a Christian family: some are of no faith, some are exploring, and others are disciples of our Lord, Jesus Christ- all are very welcome.

Now, it is customary, at the APCM for the vicar's report to look back at the previous year, ie 2023, and to cast a vision, looking forward. But I'm taking inspiration from Jesus' description of the vine and the branches in John chapter 15, for us to look, first and foremost, down. At our roots. For we are to abide in Christ. The NIV's 'remain in me' is much weaker than this sense of living in Christ, of being at home in Him. The Message says: 'Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you.' (John 15 v. 4). At our Confirmation Service, the Bishop will have prayed that the Lord 'establish, strengthen and settle you in the faith'. Abiding in; being at home in. And, if we take that picture of having roots that go deep further, then, if we live in Christ, we shall bear fruit, and this fruit-bearing will show that we are Christ's disciples.

Now, I think that this growing as disciples needs to be foundational to us as individuals and as a church family. My sense is that we are pulling away from the effects of the Covid pandemic and lockdowns, but that we are, nonetheless, a bit unsettled in how our faith is demonstrated. Hence the emphasis on growing deeper, in looking down, at checking on how our roots are doing. We are to love one another- it's a commandment that appears five times in verses 9 to 17. 'Love one another.' And through this abiding and loving, we are promised joy. So- how do we feel our discipleship to Christ, our sense of commitment to our church, is?

The Diocese has a new Strategic Framework, for 2024-2030, where the headlines are: Growing Younger, Purposeful about Evangelism, More Diverse, and Engaged with Local Communities. Nothing wrong with this at all- in fact, I'd say a hearty 'Amen!' to these goals. And yet. I keep thinking that first and foremost, and infused through all that we are and do, must be grace. Grace and love- given constantly by God to us, and then, through us, to each other and to those beyond our walls. After all, Jesus said that it is by our love that others will know that we are his.

So, with that emphasis on grace in mind, here are a few thoughts about our ministry here at Christ Church, both good and bad.

So, the not-so-good, or perhaps- what could be better:

- Finance is still an issue. Geoff will present the accounts next week, but, suffice to say, we're still reliant on the mercy of the Parish Assessor and the Director of Finance in modifying our Common Fund (previously, the Parish Share), which increased substantially a few years ago. We're just about keeping our heads above water, but we are still meeting expenditure pretty much on a hand-to-mouth basis. This paucity of funds means, of course, that we are limited in what we are able to spend.
- The churchyard is still presenting problems in terms of keeping on top of the weeds and the grass-cutting, though the Council are still, thankfully, able to strim three times a year.
- We struggle with manpower, most notably as both previous churchwardens stood down just before, and at, the last APCM. Dorothy has kindly stepped in, and is doing a wonderful job: thank you, Dorothy! But we could do with a second CW so that it doesn't all fall on Dorothy's shoulders. Please pray for another Churchwarden, and ask whether this could be you!

And the causes for celebration:

- We rejoice that we've been able to continue to serve our parish, with regular acts of worship, and with new initiatives coming through: the Home Group, for example, the Film Club continuing, the Knit and Natter, and various coffee mornings, and so forth.
- We have had, in 2023, 33 funerals, both church and crem services; 19 baptisms, and 7 weddings. This has meant that we've not only been able to offer pastoral support, but also share our faith.

- Our ministry team has grown- welcome Revds David and Angela, both now with Permission to Officiate, and new Reader Carol, alongside Margaret, and both James'.
- We also rejoice in our volunteers who work so hard as sidepersons, servers, tea and coffee servers, organists, and of course, our Treasurer and Administrator: thank you, all.
- Our relationship with Buntingsdale School has grown, with several visits to church, and with several visits by myself to the Early Years Class.

Finally, Revd Catherine, our Rural Dean, Dorothy and myself will soon work on how my hours as a half-time priest here works out in practical ways, bearing in mind that there's a lot to fit in just over three days a week, especially when I often have two services here on a Sunday: Holy Communion and a Baptism and/or the Healing Service. Please pray that we'll be guided on the best way forward.

Amen!