

APCM Reflection by Revd Tim Vickers
26th March 2023

Invocation

It is a great privilege to sit here as your Vicar, and to reflect on the year of our Lord 2022 at St John's Harpenden. As a church I think we should justifiably be proud of what we have achieved together for Christ's sake.

As we were reminded recently at our consecration anniversary, our primary purpose as a church is to worship God, and to enable others to worship the Lord almighty in all fullness. We have certainly celebrated well at St John's and our major festivals are attracting ever increasing numbers from across our community. St John's is a thriving Christian community – and not all churches can say that after the pandemic.

Along with this is an ever deepening and widening of our fellowship and an increase variety of our community life. I'm thinking here of our Patronal BBQ and rounders match, our soup lunches, concerts, Little Acorns Toddler group, Quiz Night, photographic exhibition – the list is too long to mention – many of which we have shown in the year in review – but not exclusively.

This would not have been possible without the many hours volunteered, and the dedication of many – of all ages, in time, talents and treasures. A special thank you to Heather and Jane – our churchwardens, and to everyone who has organised and led – either an event or a group. And thank you to everyone – because without you all – there would be no church and St John's wouldn't be the same.

We are indeed a very gifted congregation – with gifts in all areas from music to administration, from flower arranging to litter picking, and preaching to praying. And as I reflect deeper I am drawn to the church in Corinth, and the First of Paul's Letters to that church.

If I could I would read all of chapter 12 and chapters 13, but instead id like to read you here about the gifts of the spirit.

1 Corinthians 12.4-11

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. To one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the discernment of spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses.

Each of us here, and in the whole church, has been given a unique gift. I'm still waiting to find the miracle workers, and those who speak in tongues. It may not be the same as your neighbours, but we are called to use that gift for the sake of others and for building up the church. As Paul says in verse 7 – that they are a manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

If Paul was able to recognise such spiritual gifts even amongst the dysfunctional Corinthian church, how much more so would Paul recognise them here at St John's.

Do you know what your spiritual gifts are? Maybe you might want to find out? What about the gifts of those around you? Have you shared what you see in others? As your Vicar – think its important to realise that as a church we need all those gifts.

Because whilst 2022 was a good year for St John's it is certainly wasn't service as normal. We are faced with many challenges, and about the direction of the Church of God in this place.

One pattern that has become apparent after covid is that church going patterns have changed. Very few people now come to church every week, and worshipping God is now placed alongside other weekend activities. Whilst this is not yet a sign of lack of commitment to the church, it is a step away from the same level of participation.

In addition, whilst I rarely come across someone who doesn't want to help out if they can, less and less people want to take positions of leadership in the life of the church. I don't just means wardens or readers, but committee chairs as well as organising one off events. This result is that some things are either running short on time, or being held together by a few people.

Yet even so, amongst our number – and there are a lot of us– we have all the spiritual gifts we need, we are not lacking in anything – because God has already given us all that we need to ensure this place thrives and grows as a beacon of Christian hope and joy for this community.

And this brings me to our biggest challenge – one we might focus on for 2023 – to find a way to nurture and encourage each other in these gifts, and have the courage to use our own, for the greater good of all and to glorify God.

You see, at the moment, these changes are creating a bit of a crisis. The lack of anyone wanting to be a Warden or a PCC Secretary is just the headline – the reality is that the work of the church is falling on fewer people, and the result is those people are starting to fail. We are already finding that a lot of our important ministries may cease to take place because no one wants to lead them, or take on that responsibility. I'm quite clear that this is unsustainable, not only will we do far less as a church but you may end up without any wardens or even a vicar.

Now this is where you are fortunate to have an optimistic vicar – because every Sunday I get to look out to the congregation and think how lucky I am to serve in this place. It's not easy, it's hard and tough, but it is also full of transforming joy and hope, and there is no better feeling than knowing you are doing God's will. I want everyone to have that feeling as you use your gifts here and I hope you do this year as well.

Amen.