

Archdeacon of Dudley's Charge 2021

2 Corinthians 4: 1-10

Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

The ministry in which you are engaged as Church Wardens is a ministry entrusted to you by God. The God who gives you extraordinary power to fulfil it. But I guess you, like me, may at times in the past year have almost lost heart. We have indeed been afflicted in every way, perplexed and struck down. Our church buildings have been closed for some of the time, our worship has been affected in so many ways, and our lives together have been severely restricted. It has been a tough time.

But, we have this treasure, so we do not lose heart. We have the love and light and grace of God to prevent us from being crushed and destroyed, from being driven to despair. I hope that you have been able to cling on to God through his grace in these difficult times, even if it has been by your finger nails, only just. I know that it has only been through his strength that I have kept going, and I am thankful for his mercy, new every morning. It has sustained me through endless lockdowns, through the sadness and grief of death on a scale not known in this country since war times, through the complexities of navigating life under so many new and constantly changing guidelines and regulations. I have been really encouraged and inspired by the resilience and creativity with which you have got through this time. The many positive stories shared during the visitations have uplifted my spirits!

Now, as the vaccination effort has its effect, there is light at the end of the tunnel of this pandemic, but for those of us who trust in Jesus as Lord, there is always a glimpse of light, visible through the cracked jars that we are, as God reveals himself as our strengthening life giver in the darkest of times.

As kingdom people we are called to shine that light as we share hope with those around us, hope that is desperately needed in our communities across this deanery.

We have talked of being kingdom people in this diocese for a decade or more, people who share values of love, compassion, justice and freedom. People who are not simply church people, rather people who have a larger vision to inhabit God's world and infuse it with his love. Our diocesan vision has been strengthened over the past year, following the open conversations we had way back in those times when we could physically meet together, cosily crowded around tables. We now aim to be 'growing as kingdom people' rather than simply being kingdom people.

We aim to grow as kingdom people, sharing the good news of Jesus' love in Worcestershire and Dudley. As the body of Christ, we join together to worship God creatively, make disciples, share hope, and transform communities as we live out values of love, compassion, justice and freedom to bring about the kingdom of God on earth.

For this to happen, our churches, the churches in this deanery where you are serving as Church Wardens, need to be healthy and sustainable, so we are looking at ways to enable and support that, to inspire local church congregations to flourish and grow, to be healing and sustaining communities, and work collaboratively with other churches..

Over the coming months you will be hearing about plans to equip and strengthen parishes with new approaches and forms of support. Mission accompaniers will be offered to work with you in exploring what health and sustainability looks like in your context and your tradition, and to assist

you in planning some next steps towards that. You will already be aware that we are looking at adopting different leadership models that support and develop ordained and lay leaders in enabling local church communities to be adaptable, and to grow spiritually, numerically and in depth of discipleship. In some cases this will involve community missionary posts, or giving lay people and self-supporting clergy opportunities to lead, under oversight, in their context. We will be promoting wise stewardship that ensures financial stability and carefully considering how we best use our buildings, having in some cases fewer regular services than before where locally this makes sense.

So there will be change, and some of us find change difficult, but the church has always evolved and adapted, so change is here to stay. If nothing else, the past year has taught us that we can take nothing for granted. So many things we thought were set in stone have turned out not to be - like singing, and hugging, and gathering at all. The important thing will be to remain open to God's gentle guidance through the Holy Spirit, so we are open to the change God wants to bring as he builds his church, and reveals his glory through it, and are ready to embrace doing things differently when God prompts us, especially working with others across the deanery.

The clay jars in which the treasures of God are held - the people in this zoom gathering, the sisters and brothers in our churches, all have cracks, perhaps more than ever after the year we have had, the hardships we have endured. But through those cracks the treasure of God is revealed, his grace and strength in us, extraordinary power to equip us for the next stage of life in our churches.

As we emerge in fits and starts from lockdown I want to say a huge thank you to all of you for all you have done to keep going and keep your churches going through the pandemic. I want to encourage you to embrace change and new beginnings, and to begin to think about what it will entail for you churches to have a healthy and sustainable future. But I want to say too, over and above all that, please take time over the summer to be healthy churchwardens with a sustainable ministry. That means being kind to yourself and each other. It means taking time to recover and be refreshed, to have holidays to see friends and family from whom you have been kept far apart. It means taking time to rebuild relationships in your churches with people you have perhaps only seen virtually over recent months, and starting new friendships with people in the wider deanery. Don't get bogged down in restarting lots of things until you've had a real restorative rest. I've said this in our individual meetings. I am saying it again because it's important, and so others can hear it too!

Growing as kingdom people, making disciples, worshipping creatively, transforming our communities and sharing hope will only be done in God's strength, not ours. We proclaim Jesus, not ourselves, and the light that shines is from him, not us. God's amazing grace is sufficient, his strength is made perfect in our weakness.

May God bless you in your ministry, and give you freedom and joy as you serve as Church Wardens, from a place of refreshment and rest, and reliance on him.