

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

### Introduction

It is an occupational hazard for many clergy that they have to produce a monthly article for a Parish Magazine. Although I have never been disconnected from parish ministry, my arrival in St Neots was the first time that I had had to submit to such a discipline.

We certainly live in interesting times. Just as the two former parishes of St Neots and Eynesbury were adjusting to being one, the world was swiftly overtaken by the spread of the coronavirus that became known as Covid-19. And, as the UK government lifted the last elements of legal restriction (not that the virus had gone away), Russian troops invaded Ukraine.

I make no claims to great profundity or wit in these articles: they are not the weekly reflections during lockdown written by a retired Archbishop of Canterbury or a Rector of St Martin in the Fields. Also, I haven't included several supplementary articles I wrote about particular features of saints days and the calendar, or particular biblical books, or aspects of relaxation of lockdown as they affected services and/or Holy Week. But as the volume of words in the main articles passed the 20,000 mark, and as the Parish of St Neots with Eynesbury reached the first annual meeting to look back on a full calendar year (at the beginning of April 2022), it seemed appropriate to put the words of a particular transitional time into an assembled collection. There is indeed a fair amount of 'faithful improvisation' (as the first article suggests). Whether that leads to fascinating reading, only the reader can judge.

There are a small number of spelling and typographical mistakes in these articles that were not caught at the time of writing. They have not been corrected for this collection.

Paul Hutchinson  
March 29<sup>th</sup> 2022

### About the Author

The Revd Paul Hutchinson became Priest in Charge of the two separate parishes of St Neots and Eynesbury on Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> January 2020. By a Pastoral Scheme dated 11<sup>th</sup> February, the two parishes were united with effect from March 1<sup>st</sup> 2020, to form a single parish under a Team Ministry of which Paul was appointed the first Rector.

Before St Neots, Paul served for 10.5 years as Rector of Stokesley with Seamer in the Diocese of York (being also Archdeaconry Ecumenical Adviser for 5 years of that time, and a member of General Synod for the last six years), 7 years as Team Vicar of the Penrith etc Team Ministry in the Diocese of Carlisle (and Chaplain of the Newton Rigg Campus), and in two posts in the Diocese of Durham (where most of his family roots are).

Before ordination, Paul was a solicitor, working in Newcastle upon Tyne, having read Law at Cambridge and attended school in Durham.



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February 2020

In Matthew chapter 10 and Luke chapter 9, Jesus issues instructions to his followers about how to go on a missionary journey. The details are quite demanding at first, and then quite encouraging, but can be summed up simply as “travel light - very light”.

I've never been someone who would win prizes for following these instructions, but I am discovering first hand that the business of moving house becomes more demanding the further on in life we are. Most of us tend to accumulate – relationships, knowledge, things. The important tasks when we move are: rebalancing relationships, dramatically increasing knowledge, and coming to terms with the volume of things we carry.

A and I have moved before, of course. But 10½ years is the longest we have lived in a single home, which means all three of the tasks are bigger – substantially bigger – than they were last time; and the relationships and knowledge that make us the people we are have developed too. In coming to terms with the volume of things, we have items that were in six homes other than ours a decade ago; and we are at the point when students take a car load to university but are not looking to shed the things they leave at home. So, as a family who like books and music, we admit that we are a removal company's nightmare – and with a very different distribution of rooms here, we know the business of working out what goes where will not be completed quickly. You may find that the Church Street Rectory (the house has been renamed as part of the Team changes) is in a state of upheaval for some time!

I arrive here having had the pleasure of two enjoyable market town ministries since I left the world of full time University Chaplaincy at Sunderland in 2002. Stokesley is a smaller community (quite like Sedgefield, the County Durham town where I have my roots), but Penrith (where I worked as Team Vicar before Stokesley, also continuing with some chaplaincy), despite the different Lake District & North Pennine landscape, has a lot in common with St Neots.

Though I have that market town experience, I will admit to a bit of nervousness as I pick up the challenges of this market town in this diocese (I've always been an active participant in Diocesan as well as parish life): each market town has its culture and character, and St Neots is also changing very rapidly. It will be the first time that I have lived right next to one of my churches: Eynesbury is also nearer than most churches have been. And, as we grapple with the early and urgent challenges of bringing the churches together in a new structure, and of discovering what additional ministry the Diocesan Market Towns Initiative is now able to provide, there is a danger that people may find it takes some time to get to know me well. I hope not.

The challenges that face us all as a community of church communities (including the communities that are formed by our church schools and the other schools with which we have regular contact) are varied and considerable, and none of us has exact 2020 vision of what lies ahead. As your new priest-in-charge, I know that I am but an earthenware jar: I hope, however, that somewhere along the way the things we do together will give others a glimpse of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The Archbishop of Canterbury spoke at General Synod a couple of years ago about the importance of “faithful improvisation”, and I suspect I will need to do a lot of that while still working through the tasks of moving. I am, of course, greatly excited by the challenge: but I do hope you will be able sometimes to be patient, and also to forgive some slowness in getting names to stick! If I can't travel light, I hope I can, at least, be light-footed in the ways I learn how to work alongside much that is already excellent here.

We shall very quickly discover much more about each other. Thank you for the welcomes you have given so far. I look forward to what lies ahead.

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March 2020

Almost all the boxes have been emptied (A definitely wins the prize for that one). We can remember (most of the time) where we have put things. We've begun to get a sense of where we can buy the things we need for normal life. And we can even remember some people's names.

But something else is even newer than the Hutchinsons arriving here, and that's the parish structure that takes effect on March 1st. Clergy don't normally start their ministry in a new place by issuing legal notices and calling a Special Parochial Meeting; but I've known for some weeks that this would have to be the major opening task. The beginning of March is thus in many ways a bigger new start than my arrival was five weeks ago, and the consequences of bringing two parishes together as one will take longer to become familiar with than the habits of a new incumbent.

In Isaiah 43, the LORD says "Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"

It may prove difficult in the next few months not to remember former things. After all, as a gathered body of people, we will have to look carefully at historic finances, at the challenges of all our buildings, at recent successes and failures in mission, and at all sorts of policies and patterns of worship. We will have to hear afresh the experiences that people have had of serving God in this place, and the hopes that people may have of change in the near future or when time allows.

But all that is only necessary as a prelude to the real task that lies ahead – to work out how the two historic churches, alongside the pioneering work that is already happening at Love's Farm, can proclaim the Gospel to a new generation in our changing and expanding town.

This is not the place for laying down blueprints for the future (and I don't feel the hand of history on my shoulder). But the new things that spring forth need to be rooted in a few basic principles, and I'd like to suggest some of them here.

Firstly, in all that we do with money, we need to recognise that it is in pursuit of the common goal - the shared task - of bringing the gospel to a new generation. We have to resist the temptation constantly to refer to what's "our church's" and what's "theirs" (or indeed what's "Ely's"). With the very clear exception of funds that already have a legally restricted purpose, the income and expenditure of the new parish must be seen as an open pot. The money that belongs to and is handled by the parish must be accounted as such, and we must be prepared always to act with openness and obvious trustworthiness. Money that is used wisely for the common task is money that has the potential to be fruitful: money that is guarded and protected from the gaze of others behind fences and under metaphorical floorboards is of no credit to servants of the kingdom of God.

Secondly, in thinking about the pattern, the settings, and the content of our worship, we need to recognise the real strengths in the traditions that we inherit, but also to ask how they can best serve the Gospel in coming years. Our overall pattern (seen across the two churches) may need some reshaping if it is to speak to more than just a diminishing demand of existing worshippers. The reshaping may also make space for things – either in our existing buildings or in new places – that can't or don't happen at the moment. That's not to say that there must be wholesale change, but rather to ask if there are things we could do better, voices which could be heard more clearly, or obvious needs that could be met in a more constructive way.

Thirdly, the practical things that we do to reorganise ourselves must always simplify. They must always be aimed at releasing time and energy for the things that matter – prayer; fellowship; evangelism; compassionate action; engagement with the wider issues of our town. We must not let the business of

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being together multiply the things we have to do to keep the ship afloat. We are, after all, being given this opportunity to change so that we can do good things for God.

Finally, in all that we do, we really must prioritise the Fruits of the Spirit. I have already hinted at some of them, but for completeness, let me remind you of all nine: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If our actions and decisions don't embody these, we may be setting off in the wrong direction.

So, I look forward to the adventures which our meetings on St David's Day will initiate. May the LORD be with us!

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

April 2020

Psalm 57 begins:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,  
for my soul takes refuge in you;  
In the shadow of your wings will I take refuge  
until the storm of destruction has passed by.

I am writing this on the morning of St Cuthbert's Day, 20th March. It's four days since the government announced "social distancing" measures, and three days since the Church of England declared that all public worship would cease until further notice. Care homes have closed their doors to all but vital entrants. Universities have been telling those students who can go home to do so, and today is the last day of school for all but the children of "essential workers". We have seen the effects of panic buying on a range of items in our supermarkets and shops, and the effects of reduced traffic and reduced industry on our air quality. Those who depend upon uncertain wages and the "gig economy", those who work in non-essential retail, and those who work in the arts have very likely seen their incomes vanish. Those who work in what are now defined as "essential services", by contrast, are facing demands that they will continue to struggle to meet. Those who must "self-isolate" (what an awful phrase) are discovering that it has its challenges, however resilient they may feel at the beginning. And there are some who already know well what it is to live with the Coronavirus.

The speed of events means that this summary will inevitably read like "old news" by the time you pick up the magazine (always assuming that it hasn't become a criminal offence to post paper through front doors): I can't dare to guess how things will have moved on over this time.

Our lives have been stripped back, and in some cases stripped bare. We discover who is most important to us, and who most needs us. We learn daily the myriad ways in which what we do can have good or appalling consequences for others, and if we are eager learners, we adjust our practices to make us more caring and considerate, more mindful of what we can do or not do that will better the lives of others. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself", a key text in our celebrations on March 1st, takes on new power when we realise how much we have yet to discover about our neighbour's need, and our neighbour's vulnerability.

Saint Cuthbert, Bishop of Lindisfarne, has long been a central figure in my own sense of identity – and that has been true again this year. As I travelled north on the 17th to collect my younger son from University, I had time to break my journey at Durham in time for Evensong – except there wasn't any. So I began my experience of this time without public worship by being on the outside, sitting at the front of the empty Nave (as it happens, near a couple of well known old friends) as a distant sound could be heard of private prayers being said at Cuthbert's tomb. I learnt something of isolation and exclusion at that moment, and so resolved that any worship that I provide by the internet would be directed at the recipient, and not be something that people eavesdropped upon as bystanders.

So, as I prepared my short daily act of worship (see below) today, I realised that the adolescent Cuthbert had lived through a time of some kind of plague, and he had survived the illness; that in his time as Abbot of Lindisfarne, he had practised social distancing from time to time on the small tidal islet across from the church; that he had expended great effort to keep in touch with people at considerable distances; and that in his time as hermit on Farne, he had been in a kind of self-isolation, but one that made him available to others and to God. No wonder that the monks decided at a meeting at two fords on the River Aln in the winter of 684-5 that they wanted him as Bishop, and no wonder that, after being a Bishop for only two years, he still remained the most revered figure of his generation, and has left his mark on the North East and Cumbria through every generation since. Perhaps this time is his time too...

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In my last sermon in church, I spoke of the need to keep in touch with each other. In the last hymn at St Neots, we sang “Scattered flock, one Shepherd sharing / lost and lonely, one voice hearing / ears are open to your word”. We may not be “gathered church”, but we can still be “scattered church” if we say our prayers, make our peace, and share our thoughts.

I have yet to work out every way in which I can be of effective service to this community in this time, but one thing I have started to do is post a short (6-9 minutes) Act of Worship each day on the internet. I know that not everyone has internet access, but I encourage all who do to use the short acts I provide to keep alive the feeling that you are part of a larger church community in St Neots and Eynesbury. I use the Facebook pages of the two churches to post my contributions – so if you are a Facebook user go directly and find them. But the GOOD NEWS if you are not a Facebook user is that you can access the St Neots page from the link on the front page of the [www.stneots.org](http://www.stneots.org) website, and don't need to become a Facebook user to see what I post there.

I don't intend to try to provide anything bigger. National media and Black Cat Radio will provide Sunday programmes which we don't need internet access to reach; and our Cathedral at Ely is likely to be among those who provide something that we can connect to with internet access.

And, of course, there's the phone... Keep in touch. Keep encouraging each other. Keep me posted! And eventually, one day, after this long “Holy Saturday” is past, we will reach a new kind of Easter Day.

With my good wishes, prayers and love,

## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21**

May/June 2020 ('The Archway')

WELCOME to the first edition of an occasional newsletter!

Keeping in touch is important. I know that, over the last 6 weeks, my emails (and the videos that Margaret Marshall and I are putting on Facebook and YouTube) have been reaching the majority of the church congregations. But a substantial minority are unable to gain access to these, so I need occasionally to write something which reaches those who are not online (sending also by email to those who are).

Eventually, the Parish ought to be able to distribute a full magazine by this twin track, but we haven't been able to adapt the format in time for this month. So this letter from me is in place of The Messenger.

When it comes to producing occasional newsletters, I have some "form". In all my last three places (Stokesley, Penrith, Sunderland), there were times when something bigger than a letter but smaller than a magazine was needed, and I put it together. I also did something like this to report from General Synod. But I have never been a full Magazine Editor.

I hope it fills a gap for you. It can't be as good as personal contact; and it's not exactly the phone call of a longstanding personal friend. But I hope it gives you a sense that the church community and I are not very far away, and helps you to deal with at least some of the frustrations of not being able to come to church. So do enjoy these few pages. This may not be the last time I write this way – any comments it are, of course, very welcome.

With my best wishes,

First thoughts...

Do you remember the epistle that was read the last time we were all able to be together in church? From Chapter 5 of St Paul's Letter to the Romans, these words rang out:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

We are all suffering. This suffering isn't a matter for boasting (actually, Paul is using the word 'boasting' a bit differently to how we may think, but this isn't the place for that discussion), but it is very real. We are not experiencing the same sufferings: for some it is the suffering of the illness; for others the suffering of bereavement; the suffering of lack of treatment for other conditions; the suffering of overwork in an exposed occupation; of being constantly exposed to unseen risks; of knowing that we may be a risk to others; of isolation; of separation; of loneliness (not the same as either separation or isolation); of lack of work; of shortage of money; of lack of basic necessities; of fear for the future; of anxiety about the present; of loss of a sense of position in society; of aimlessness and lack of daily routine; of being in a dangerous or abusive domestic situation; of being frightened by the attitudes of our neighbours; of too much information that scares us; of an overwhelming sense of powerlessness.

In the face of that suffering, endurance, character and hope are indeed the things we need to cultivate. But it's not easy. Almost all of the things I have listed above eat away at our endurance, test our character, and can undermine our hopes if we let them. We magnify the obstacles that we face; we do and say things that, in normal times, we would chide ourselves for; we focus on unrealistic hopes instead of our ultimate hope.

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We need therefore to recognise that we all suffer – and to let that realisation shape the ways in which we each work to reduce the suffering for others as best we can. The need to keep our distance is a real burden here, but the little things that each of us can do for those we know, and some of those who have surprisingly become our neighbours (in the “Good Samaritan” sense) are never to be belittled. The call of Love is one that can be answered in small gestures, seemingly insignificant acts, and the kindness of friends and strangers.

Each of us can find a particular calling in this. Many of us have found it – and I have heard of a lot that should be celebrated. But we are indeed “earthenware vessels” (yes, we’re back to that reading at my Licensing again), and we all have to practise compassion to each other and to ourselves at a level that we have rarely experienced before. After all, none of us has had this experience (unless we happen to have been in a medical team in Africa or South Asia in the last 20 years). So we are all finding our way – and we need our friends to keep us on track.

I have been trying to help with the things I have said and done online (with due recognition of those who haven’t got access), and I have done so knowing how little I know of the community I serve. But I haven’t found it a straightforward task. It’s been a real struggle to find the words for this ‘letter’: I set myself significant targets for publication – St Anselm’s Day; the three month mark of my arrival; the end of the second month of the united parish. All have come and gone, each subverted by an inner voice that starts “But what about...?”. Writing is a different task to speaking, and whilst in much of my life the former has come more easily than the latter, the immediacy of speech (and its unrevisable nature, especially when coupled with my high “erm...” count) seems better to fit the times. At least it does for me, and that I think is the point of what I’m saying here.

When I was a University Chaplain, a wise and long-serving chaplain (who, like Annette Reed, was someone A and I had encountered at an early stage of our vocational training) listened to my worries about what I was doing, and responded “Paul – do what you can, not what you can’t”. They’re words I’ve come back to numerous times in the last 20 years, and they seem apt for us all. They also remind us that we are never to beat ourselves up for the things that we can’t do, or the days and times that we can’t do them.

So I hope that you have found something in this current time that leaves you feeling that you have, in a small way, done something that mattered. But if you don’t have that something, don’t reproach yourself. All are suffering, and compassion for ourselves is as important as our compassion for others.

Stay safe!



## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21**

July/August 2020

Back in the last full print edition of *The Messenger* (prepared for April), I quoted Psalm 57:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,  
for my soul takes refuge in you;  
In the shadow of your wings will I take refuge  
until the storm of destruction has passed by.

Strangely, on Thursday 25th June, the day on which we opened one of our church buildings for private prayer for the first time since lockdown, I said Morning Prayer in church (at Eynesbury) for the first time since mid March: and Psalm 57 was one of the set psalms.

The storm of destruction has not yet fully passed by, and we all continue to need to take appropriate care. But we now know that we will soon be able to resume public worship (including Baptisms and Weddings) in our churches – and we are already able to host small scale funerals (two listed so far - still subject to strict limits on attendance). As I write this, we have no idea what the content of government guidance for those services is going to be; and we have no idea what interpretation central church authorities (and then our own Bishops) will place upon what is directed.

But our earnest hope is that we will be able to worship publicly on Sunday 5th July.

If we can – then I expect to be presiding at three eucharists: 8 a.m. (BCP) at St Neots (nave altar – the Lady Chapel is not large enough); 9.30 a.m. at St Neots; 11 a.m. at Eynesbury. I wrote in the May Archway of my need to be in both churches most Sundays, and this is the immediate working out of that need, as we must make sure over coming week that we establish safe and sustainable patterns, and the primary responsibility for that remains with me. When we reach a time when restrictions can be eased further, we can take some time to review the position if it is desired. Confirmation of what is happening on July 5th will come out by electronic means as soon as it is known.

Whatever can be arranged, two metres will have to continue to be the normal social distancing except at those moments where it cannot be (e.g. when the president administers communion – which will inevitably be in one kind only). Please remember that the distancing requirements will apply in church, as we make our ways in and out, and as we wait to enter or leave.

In the mean time, Eynesbury Church is open, stewarded, for private prayer between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. on Thursdays. St Neots Parish Church is having a major clean, and questions about what will happen there on weekdays, and what might be a sustainable pattern of weekday eucharists at both churches, will be addressed as we work our way through July. We also need to give thoughtful attention to St Neots Church Rooms before we allow users to resume any activities.

I intend to continue the Saturday evening Facebook Live eucharists for the foreseeable future. If we can establish reliable WiFi in St Neots PC (it's being looked at), the service may move to the Lady Chapel; if not, it will stay in the Upper Room. There may also continue to be other online reflections.

It would be dangerous to write more at this point! Things continue to be very fluid. I hope it's not too long before I see you in person, or if not, that you are able to stay connected by other means.

With my prayers and good wishes,

## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21**

September 2020

It's not normally wise for clergy to write long articles, but there are times when it is right. This seems such a moment. So you may want tea/coffee and a biscuit to hand before you embark on this one!

How are we to recover the things that we have lost?

There are many moments in life when this question comes upon us. Some of these moments aren't particularly significant in the bigger scheme of things; some of them (such as bereavement, job loss, business failure, or the break-up of a household) make the question near-impossible to answer; but at some moments in life it's essential to grasp hold of the question, and ask what we can do (even if not necessarily immediately) to ensure that things that have gone from us for a time are not permanently consigned to history.

We're in the sixth month of Coronavirus restrictions. In many ways the situation has eased since the darkest days of March and April. But we also know that our situation could return there or – perish the thought – become even harder. Further, our resolve to overcome what we have suffered may have already taken a big blow, or it may be very fragile, capable of being blown apart by seemingly small knocks and scrapes.

I could write more about that in relation to personal experience that each of us has had; but what I want to begin to address here is how the last six months have affected our identity as a church; and where the path ahead might present us with dangers that we can never overcome.

How are we to recover the things that we have lost?

This question has occurred at several points in the history of our faith, though it's not often expressed that way.

Some in the Christian community might want to say that what lies ahead of us is a "Resurrection moment" or a "Pentecost moment", a moment when everything is transformed beyond all recognition, and God sweeps through to renew the community of the faithful. I'm not so sure about that.

It seems to me that we are closer to another significant Biblical moment, a moment that has left profound marks on Jewish and Christian faith, though we often pay it little attention: the return from Exile in Babylon. It's really difficult to gauge what in that era is a rediscovery of what was lost, and what was a new creation for new times. It's also really difficult to work out how long (months? years? decades?) it took them to come to particular decisions. And yet the task that they had is a question for us too: how are we to recover the things that we have lost?

Perhaps we need to start by recognising what hasn't been lost over these months. The identity of the two parish churches is as people who are gathered around the Lord's Table. To an extent that I have not seen since my curacy, these are churches whose primary identity is eucharistic. The eucharist has been celebrated here in a number of different ways, but it has long been core to our worship and therefore how we describe ourselves. In that respect, much more unites our two churches than divides them. We also describe ourselves at least in part by how we sit in the story of our town – the history we embody. And we are also a community where some like to be generously charitable in an unseen way

All these things have continued. The regular celebration of the eucharist never stopped, whether when we were confined to being online, or when we returned to our buildings. The marking of historic events – whether VE/VJ, the lives of St Neot and St Anselm, or the normal annual round of Christian feasts – has been done, online or socially distanced. And, as Carol Way and Lottie Taylor and others will testify, the willingness of congregation members to give to help those in need has also continued. All is not lost.

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But almost everything else has been put on hold. I'm well aware, for example, that some church members have made a conscious decision not to return to worship – whether because of their own continuing health needs, or from a feeling that the particular thing that has been a passion of theirs in church life has been put aside, or because of a conflict that has become more acute as lockdown has progressed. And, among those who have returned, there is an understandable feeling that, for now, so much has had to be pared down from worship. There's almost no active children's work, no choir or music group, no teams of servers, no promotion of bible study, no social activity, no focused fund-raising. The list could certainly go on. And while we do have six eucharists each week (as we did before, though each is different now, and they are less diverse in style than they were), that alone does not fill the gap.

Some of our church life has been getting thinner for a while. As someone who isn't a children's work specialist, I was acutely aware in my early weeks here that things were clearly much less active than they had been two or three years before. I was also struck by how limited our contact with non-church schools has become - we have to be more than simply a venue for a Christmas service – and that our relationships with our church schools are more complex than they might seem at first sight. Add in, as part of returning to our churches, that we've had to put our children's material into store for a time, and it's very natural to ask whether the Church continues to have any interest in family life, or in encouraging children's faith.

It certainly does, but our Churches will need to find new tools, new labourers, and new techniques to regain any strength in a core part of their identities. We look forward to the arrival of a children's and families worker a little later in the Changing Market Towns initiative; but we also need to rediscover the skills amongst our existing membership to rebuild activity as soon as COVID19 relaxation makes it possible. Apart from a few small online things amongst friends (such as the Play Church group), there's much that we still can't do right now; but we need to be ready for it when we can, and we also need to be alert to the continuing relationship we have with the Christian community that is developing at Love's Farm and Wintringham

Music-making is another major challenge, and one I know rather more about. In my adult lifetime I've been sad to see proud parish choral traditions collapsing in many places that I've once known. I sense that the tradition has become more vulnerable here than many would like it to be – and COVID19 has the potential to complete the process for us. For churches of our traditions, the loss of the music tradition would be a profound one (as would the permanent loss of serving teams, and worship with a stronger catholic identity). I think we need to recognise that in this area, we need to look beyond a simple recovery of what is lost to asking how we might create something which is more distinctive, and reaches out further. Children's choirs; more specialist sub-regional vocal ensembles; instrumental diversity; a clear philosophy for music-making outside worship: these are all part of the way forward alongside the treasure that we carry in organ and existing choir. We can't take for granted that music-making will continue as it has done, and of course the world of music-making has faced particularly acute challenges in these last months - so the way forward may not become clear soon.

At present, the church's congregations look less diverse in age, social background, and ethnic identity that they did even at the beginning of the year. As part of that, I've noticed that I haven't had easy opportunities to build good relationships with new members or people who aren't absolutely at the heart of church life. There's also a strong chance that I will neither baptise a child nor conduct a marriage here this year. Lockdown has nudged many of us towards staying in touch with the people we get on with best, so we may not yet have started to miss the people we know less well. The continuing restrictions on basic sociability don't help, but they don't let us off the hook either. As we become more able to gather again, it will become essential to rebuild cross-generational links, to make connections between people who otherwise don't know each other, and of course, also to reach out to those in need with food and practical help.

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We do need to recover some confidence in study and prayer. We have a rich inheritance, but only by sharing our accumulated insights, being open to a bigger picture than the one we already know, and by being publicly caught up in the big issue of living a life of faith, will we communicate to others what is really life-affirming and life changing about being part of communities like ours. Other churches in our town offer different visions of the Christian life – we need not to lose sight of the practices that sustain the vision that is ours, or to lose an honest confidence in our faith.

We also have to embark on a good conversation about what all our buildings are for. Our town centre, like all town centres, is a community in rapid transition, and the various spaces which are ours could be powerful tools in building new identities. I am well aware that St Neots Parish Church and its Church Room has been the subject of much inconclusive thought in the last two decades. We need to listen carefully to what our wider town might need to find in either of our churches (even if those shaping the general thinking about town haven't so far included the Churches), and not assume it's what they might have wanted ten or twenty years ago, or even last year. I need to be clear about this - I don't believe that any of our buildings are a liability to us; but I don't think any of them serve us as well as they could. Working out what to do with them (especially when we have such poor local parking at both sites) may take time, and will, of course also need to take into account massive technological change.

None of these things will happen overnight. The restrictions that we are still under will deprive us of many familiar landmarks in coming months. I can't see Harvest, All Souls and Remembrance being marked in normal ways; and at this point I find it difficult to imagine how we can give events in December the character that people normally expect at Christmas. There may well be rather more sorrow, sighing and tears before we can return to Zion with singing.

But I do hope we can rediscover a sense that we are on a common journey to find answers to many of these questions. The Christian calling is always to be in community with people who we don't necessarily like and people we don't necessarily agree with: and yet it is to be a community of love. We may not yet be able to clasp each others' hands; we may not yet be able to make a joyful noise to the Lord, and we may not yet be able to spend happy hours in the company of people who are on the way to becoming friends. But without that shared endeavour of the common journey, these coming months could be a hard road for many of us. Let's hope they're not.

With my good wishes for the coming autumn,

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

October 2020

“Rejoice with me...”

Last month, I wrote at some length on the question “how are we to recover the things we have lost?” I hope it stimulated the beginnings of conversations, and the recognition that answers will not come simply or quickly. The recent imposition of the “Rule of Six”, and the rapid introductions of new local lockdowns in places like the North East (not to mention the dubious habits of our politics and the further signs of environmental crisis) tell us that there will be no linear progress to a better future.

So this month, much more briefly, I’d like to ask the parallel question: “What have we found this year?” More specifically, what are the things we have been able to rejoice in - discoveries about ourselves; discoveries about our relationships; discoveries about our communities, neighbourhoods, country and world?

Have you been the recipient of unexpected generosity from a friend or a stranger?

Have you been able to find in quiet and loneliness some glimpses of God that have come fresh, or are an echo of a time long ago?

Have you discovered within yourself deeper wells of patience and kindness?

Have you realised that some of the trappings of “normality” can quite happily be put aside?

Have you rekindled an old friendship that you wish you had renewed years ago?

Have you discovered the value of well told stories, or the stories that give definition to the communities you belong to?

Have you realised in new ways how much you depend upon others for the real necessities of life – food, basic supplies, medication, companionship?

Have you found, through absence and separation, the depth of your affection for someone whom you had taken a bit for granted?

Have you begun (yet!) to think about what is really essential in your forthcoming celebration of all things “Christmas”?

Have you been able to reframe the situations about which others are grumbling, so that they can be seen as opportunities for change and growth?

Have you found that simple things can be as much a source of delight as the most elaborate preparations?

Some of these questions are, of course, the stuff of Harvest celebration too. So we will have an eye on generosity towards others - through Christian Aid, through the Foodbank and Act 435, through the relationships we have with communities overseas – in the early part of October. These things won’t connect quite so directly with our schools this year, because of necessary distance, but they won’t be disconnected either. Keeping St Luke’s Day on one Sunday will connect us again with the needs of the strained health services of the world – and it’s worth remembering that my quotation at the top of this article comes from the three “lost and found” parables of Luke Chapter 15.

Not all of us will readily be able to identify something that we have been able to find that gives us joy. Perhaps we need to sense again that God comes and finds us, that God rejoices in us even when we

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cannot rejoice in ourselves. Perhaps we need to be more receptive to the small gestures of grace – the warm greeting, the space given, the quiet smile – that are the stuff of everyday cheerfulness. Perhaps we just need to turn in the opposite direction to usual when we step out of our front door.

Whatever your situation, I hope that this month you can find something which is a source of joy – and also be someone who is a source of joy for others.

With my continuing good wishes,

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

November 2020

Perhaps I should start with an admission. I have mixed feelings about November. That may be because it's the month when I get a year older (sometimes on Remembrance Sunday). Or it may be because the first half of the month is so taken up with darkness and death, in church, in the natural environment, and in our wider culture. Or it may be because it's the month when good intentions about preparations for December usually evaporate. On the other hand, I have lots of good memories from the second half of the month: favourite saints' days; landmark meetings of General Synod; good retreats; interesting conferences...

For many, the run-up to November is no great cheer, either. Fireworks start going off (I've not yet heard any here – but that could be the acoustics around the Rectory); the clocks change (helpful for shorter days in the North – not so significant here); and there is the dreadful mash-up of American import, pagan reinvention, and commercial opportunity that is the modern Hallowe'en.

I have the impression from St Neots Facebook groups that, thanks to COVID19 restrictions, we may see a considerable reduction in the nuisance of Hallowe'en this year: but it doesn't take away the deep ambivalence that many of us have about the darker traditions that have returned to prominence in the last generation, alongside the wastefulness that ends up each year in landfill. This is not the year for a renewal of Christian alternatives (such as the Messy Church events of recent memory), but it's a good time to remind ourselves of their value in the life of the Church.

In the Western Church, we've only been celebrating the feast of All Hallows / All Saints since the ninth century (during the lifetime of St Neot, as it happens); but it gives us – thank goodness - an altogether brighter celebration, and reminds us of the extraordinary legacy of those who have gone before us in faith. That said, any remembering of Christian heroes of past and present generations cannot flinch from the reality that many of them (in many generations including our own) have suffered martyrdom for their faith. With 1st November falling on a Sunday this year, this bitter-sweet remembering will be at the heart of our morning worship that day.

Christians began honouring the memory of departed loved ones (or sometimes not-so-loved ones) about a century and a half after All Hallows entered the calendar – about the time that St Neot's relics first arrived here. The Protestant Reformation suppressed such remembering in non-Catholic countries, but the twentieth century (in the context of the world wars) saw a renewal, and we have been holding some form of memorial at both our churches (and in all my previous parishes) for many years. This year, we will inevitably be more restrained, and keeping an eye on Covid guidance. So the services where names will be read will be the two weekday 9.30 a.m. eucharists, on 4th and 5th November – and I hope to stream the Wednesday service live on Facebook so that many can be part of the service even if they can't be there in person. We've lost many old friends over the past year, so I know it will be a particularly poignant time: if you know someone who might find it helpful to take part either in person or online, do please make them aware.

The problems of Covid restrictions and the measures needed to hold multiple services in church are, of course, also having a major effect on Remembrance this year. Acts of Remembrance are not (at the time of writing) against the law – and will happen at 11am on Remembrance Sunday (8th) at both our War Memorials – but there will be no formal parades in Town, and the wreath laying will be by single representatives of a range of local organisations, without large delegations. It will be possible for socially distanced bystanders to be present, but it is not encouraged: there will be no Service of Remembrance in St Neots Church after the Act of Remembrance; while at Eynesbury the morning eucharist will follow the Act of Remembrance at about 11.10/11.15. It's also hoped that the St Neots Act of Remembrance will be live on the Mayor's Facebook page, and possibly also on Black Cat Radio (for which I will be doing the 930 worship that morning).

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You may, of course, also want to pause again at 11 a.m. on the 11th. As on the anniversaries of VE & VJ Days this year, there will be a small Act of Remembrance at the St Neots memorial – but, of course, the aim of that moment is always to spread the silence around the whole community (schools, shops, and other workplaces included), not to gather them in one place.

So much for the first half of the month – what lies ahead?

As PCC members already know, I am finding it quite hard at the moment to visualise how we can hold many of our Christmas and pre-Christmas services when the normal numbers far exceed our current capacities. It doesn't help, of course, that I have no memory of what the "old normal" looked like in practice here (as opposed to the dozen or so places where I've been before), but there are many other considerations (including the ban on congregational singing, and the requirement for children indoors to stay in their seats with their parents) to balance too.

I can, however, report that on Advent Sunday, 29th November, there will be an Advent service of music and readings in St Neots Church at 6pm. The exact content has yet to be finalised, but the intention is that it will be the first main service to include singing by choir members (though not by the congregation). The start of new church year seems such an appropriate time to lay down such a milestone – but there is still the substantial possibility that rules will tighten before then, so nothing is guaranteed.

As I write, I know that I will have other things to say not long after this magazine appears! But I can't just yet...

With my very best wishes for what in so many ways will be a challenging month.



## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

December 2020 / January 2021

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us...

Ah – the problems of setting our plans down in writing! Even with careful attempts to future-proof what I wrote, my article last month referred to several things that didn't take place (though with the relentless passage of time, I did indeed become a year older). For that reason, this issue will NOT include details of Special Christmas Services.

The next issue of the Messenger will – incredibly for me – appear around the first anniversary of my arrival here. Whatever happens between now and then, it will have been an extraordinary year. Perhaps theological colleges should start teaching a module entitled “what to do when a public health emergency arrives in your first year in post”: but what would you have to do to get a pass mark (let alone honours)?

But on to more theological things... It has been observed on many occasions that Christianity is a religion which believes that the Word became flesh, but then expends great efforts to convert it back to words again. The making of many books is something which has been lamented since the time of Ecclesiastes, and though the Christian publishing trade is a shadow of its former self, believers continue to write extensively in ways that don't always build up the Body of Christ. There is a calling to exercise reticence at the keyboard...

But this year has been different. This year, we have been forced to convert flesh back to words, as we are told most firmly – and sometimes with the force of law – that we must keep our distance. We have to make do with words. That may be reassuring to those of us who write regularly, whether on computer or with pen and paper – but it's not altogether good news.

What do we do when the situation asks for a silent “sitting-with”? Silence alone is not at all the same thing. Or what do we do when a challenging turn of events demands just the right words, and we're so out of practice in our speech that the words won't come? Or how do we break the silence that we practise in our various isolations (partial or near-complete), or into which we have sunk as a degree of depression has taken hold? There are ways in which this year has de-skilled us all, however much it may have helped some of us to work out how to set up and talk to camera, send bulk e-mail, and use video-conferencing technology.

One of the great themes of Christmas faith is the idea that as the eternal Word came into the world, the world stood silent in awe. One of my favourite carols catches the idea as “The world in solemn stillness lay...” (I believe there may be other carols that speak of night-time silence too); Robert Bridges spoke of “heark'ning in the aspect of the eternal silence”; and the Wisdom of Solomon, in the Old Testament Apocrypha, at 18.14 says: “For while gentle silence enveloped all things, and night in its swift course was now half-gone, your all-powerful word leapt from heaven”.

This year, having suffered so much silence, and so much lack of human contact, it may be tempting to try to expel the undifferentiated silence, and fill every Christmas moment with noise, with reminders of jollity, yes, even with all our favourite Christmas tunes on CDs in the background (How do you plead, Mr Hutchinson? ‘Guilty, m'lud’).

We're going to need to do some of that in our homes, undoubtedly, because we cannot do it in the normal way in church, and there are limited possibilities – to be exercised very cautiously – for being in company with others. But I think we also need to create at least a little space for domestic silence; for lighting that candle as we stand or sit still; for attending to that favourite picture – not so that we can be sentimental as we look upon a new-born (wonderful as that experience is) but so that we can sense again the great wonder that, as Richard Crashaw put it, is found in the “Great little one, whose all embracing birth lifts earth to heaven, stoops heav'n to earth”

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I write this on the first day that we will be illuminating the St Neots Church windows from dusk to 9pm, as part of the town Christmas lights. You may have already heard that we were doing this (there was a tidal wave of approval on social media when I announced it a few days ago). Perhaps as part of your Christmas wanderings, you might come and look one Advent evening yourself: do remember that the Christmas windows of the Lady Chapel will also stay lit through the twelve days of Christmas.

However you frame your Christmas company, sounds, and silence, I hope this season brings surprising joys for you. Be assured that you will not be alone when you find some of it strange and different.

With my very best wishes for what in so many ways will be a challenging month.

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

February 2021

“White Lent”

Now quit your care and anxious fear and worry;  
for schemes are vain and fretting brings no gain.  
To prayer, to prayer!  
Bells call and clash and hurry, in Lent the bells do cry,  
'come buy, come buy, come buy with love the love most high'.

Lent comes in the spring, and spring is pied with brightness;  
the sweetest flowers, keen winds, and sun, and showers,  
their health do bring  
to make Lent's chastened whiteness; for life to men\* brings light  
and might, and might, and might to those whose hearts are right.

To bow the head in sackcloth and in ashes,  
or rend the soul, such grief is not Lent's goal;  
but to be led  
to where God's glory flashes, his beauty to come nigh,  
to fly, to fly, to fly where truth and light do lie.

For is not this the fast that I have chosen?  
(the prophet spoke) to shatter every yoke,  
of wickedness  
the grievous bands to loosen, oppression put to flight,  
to fight, to fight, to fight till every wrong's set right.

For righteousness and peace will show their faces  
to those who feed the hungry in their need,  
and wrongs redress,  
who build the old waste places, and in the darkness shine.  
Divine, divine, divine it is when all combine!

Then shall your light break forth as doth the morning;  
your health shall spring, the friends you make shall bring  
God's glory bright,  
your way through life adorning; and love shall be the prize.  
Arise, arise, arise! and make a paradise!  
(\*and women!)

Percy Dearmer (1867-1936), first published in 'Songs of Praise' (1925/1931)

The Rector writes...

The things we sing when young stay with us. My years at senior school have left in my head several hymns – attached to very fine tunes, which may have helped – that have stuck with me even though I have not continued to sing them: Robert Bridges' 'Thee will I love, my God and King'; Francis Thompson's 'O world invisible we view thee'; T.T. Lynch's 'Gracious Spirit dwell with me' (sung at my confirmation); and Percy's Dearmer's 'Now quit your care' (printed opposite).

This is not the place for a biography of the Revd Percy Dearmer, but one of his legacies to us is as words editor of The English Hymnal (1906), Songs of Praise (1925/31 – leading also to 1950s BBC and schools' hymn books), and the Oxford Book of Carols (1928). His Lenten carol 'White Lent' (beautifully set to the

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old French carol tune “Quittez, pasteurs”) appeared in both SoP and OBC, and is full of allusions to Isaiah chapters 55 and 58 (part of what is often called ‘Third Isaiah’) – it points us to Lent as a time of brightness, a time of positive action, prayer, and love.

At the time that you read this, you may not be thinking of Lent in particularly positive terms. Lent 2020 was blown apart mid-way by the first lockdown; and now Lent 2021 will be similarly blighted. This Lent, the bells are unlikely to call, not everyone will experience the best health, and we may continue to feel too distant from our friends. How on earth can we make Lent a special spiritual time when we have already given up or lost so much?

You may, of course, already have a plan. If your normal activity involves picking up a book, you may have already ordered one. If you haven't, there's more than a fortnight to go before Lent starts, so there's still time – elsewhere in the magazine, there are some hints of where to look. If you routinely forego some food or other comfort, you may still be planning to do that – and maybe lockdown inspires you to do something slightly differently this year, or an additional commitment to get out and exercise (in whatever way is appropriate). If you take up a positive challenge or a charity to donate to, you may already have something in mind – perhaps especially if you take seriously Percy Dearmer's words from Isaiah 58 “the grievous bands to loosen...to feed the hungry in their need... and to build the old waste places”.

Maybe you're still looking for inspiration. I suspect you will not be alone in that. I shall try to be a little more frequent with online reflections than I have been in January; I shall be joining other Churches Together ministers in contributing daily brief thoughts to Black Cat Radio; I will almost certainly set up a weekly Compline with short meditation online (to be confirmed); and I may yet be able to offer an online prayer and study group via Zoom, when I can settle upon something that I think will work. It may even be possible to resume some limited worship in one or both churches, if the signs are that it is becoming safer again to do so. But it's too early to say just yet.

I've found it particularly helpful recently to focus on the Psalms. They were one of the elements of our eucharistic worship that had to be put aside in our 2020 quest to keep services short. But they feature in other daily prayer, and broadcast Sunday evening prayer. They keep us in touch with the widest possible range of situations and emotions. Prayers based on them have been appearing daily on Facebook through much of January. I've been trying to let their familiar words have a little more time to sink in when I pray. And I shall, no doubt, add to my collection of Malcolm Guite's sonnets when his new book of Psalm sonnets, ‘David's Crown’ appears later in February.

Why not join me in taking time with the Psalms? Find them in your Bible if you don't normally go to a prayer book. If you haven't got access to a set scheme, try beginning at the beginning, and, each time you do it, take however many Psalms amount to around 40 verses, give or take a few. It doesn't matter what day you do it on, or what time of day you do it. But see what emotions they stir, and pay attention to what surprises you, delights you, and saddens you the most. If it's helpful, jot down one or two verses in a diary that particularly strike you on any day.

Let yourself be led to where God's glory flashes. Let yourself be led to beauty, to light shining in the darkness. And, most of all, hear the Psalms, whatever emotion they express, as a call to prayer. And remember: though it's hard going at times, there's a mounting sense of joy as you near the end.

Happy Lent!

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

March 2021

Have you ever suffered from ‘writer’s block’? I must confess that I am relieved that I never set out to be a professional writer in any sphere. Too often I find that the process of sitting down to turn half-formed thoughts into a coherent article of any kind (or indeed a formal scripted sermon) turns those thoughts into a modern housing estate of many cul-de-sacs, and I then hit bollards just when the end seems to be in sight. A common enough experience in St Neots, but not a good experience for an author! So this month I’m sparing you a labyrinthine excursion round Covenant Gardens and Deal Close.

Instead, I want here to salute writers. The people who spend time researching their subject matter so that they can write informatively and authoritatively on something about which we should care passionately. The people who take care to craft poetry, or to shape the structure of good novels and to create deep characters, particularly when those works and characters point us (directly or not) to the truths of God. The people who turn burning current issues into dramas that move us and change our perspective. The people who can pen a letter with thoughts which inspire and comfort. The people who take care to keep communities connected (not least in local journalism, which is suffering huge financial pressures), and who know how not to descend into clichés or into the jargon of an in-crowd that automatically puts off anyone outside the club.

As it happens, this issue of the Messenger connects us with several writers whose work is worthy of praise. I’ve given a mixed review here of a Biblical book to which I’ve rarely paid much attention, but I want to give a much more positive affirmation to the mountain of work that Margaret Marshall has produced over the whole of the last twelve months. She mentions it tangentially in her article at the back of this issue – but, having seen most of her scripts before they have been turned into video, I have seen first-hand the scale of the total operation, and I also know a little of the frustration of turning scripts into finished works when light is variable, when there are loud noises off, and when internet speeds revert to the era of the horse and cart. Margaret admits to inspiration from Malcolm Guite’s poetry (without which much of my broadcasting this year would also have been the poorer) and would, I think, also credit Alan Bennett with establishing so strongly the value of story-telling monologues. The extent to which she turns the bare bones of a structural idea (sometimes from me) into a fully worked up story is quite remarkable. And Lent has brought out of her an even more integrated piece of work: many of you will be beginning to reap the benefit of that just as this magazine reaches you.

Of course, she’s not alone in the ‘local’ writers’ column this month. I haven’t read Robin Walters’ script yet, but I’m very much looking forward to doing so when it comes out in book form. If you’re interested in his murder mystery, do follow his suggestion to maximise the fundraising by obtaining it directly from him if you can.

I’ve had a tiny involvement in a third piece of writing recently too. An old friend from university has been translating a recent scholarly book about hunger in the New Testament from the German original, and just occasionally she’s thrown questions my way. If you find me talking about such issues after it’s published – you know where that’s come from!

It’s very easy to churn out many words. It’s much harder to turn out the right words at the right length. Having spent a lot of time in the last decade digesting heavy church reports (the one on my table just now is the recent resource book for ‘Living in Love and Faith’ – Ely Diocese clergy will have having a study day in early March on this major project on Christian teaching and learning about identity, sexuality, relationships, and marriage), I know that the church doesn’t always get the balance right. But when faithful Christian people can distil profundity into words which shine with truth – not only in all the forms of writing I have mentioned so far, but also in hymns and prayers – our lives are much the better for it.

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Behind every good writer, there is, of course, a good editor and proofreader. I know that ours will be wanting me to stop before my words reach the end of her second page – so even if you think there's more I could be saying here, I know this is where I must end! So, I've just time to salute her too...

Enjoy Lent as best you can. I do hope that the next Messenger comes at a time when we can have more positive news about being open for worship.

Till then, au revoir and à Dieu!

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21

April 2021

We've been here before. As we work our way through a fortnight of remembering 'this day last year', I've reminded myself of what I wrote at the end of the first lockdown. I see that I looked back at the Psalm that I quoted before lockdown, Psalm 57:

Be merciful to me, O God, be merciful to me,  
for my soul takes refuge in you;  
In the shadow of your wings will I take refuge  
until the storm of destruction has passed by.

...and noted that the day on which we opened one of our church buildings for prayer for the first time since that lockdown (25th June), I said Morning Prayer in church (at Eynesbury): and Psalm 57 was one of the set psalms.

On that occasion, my letter here talked about practical changes. There's no need to talk about practicalities this time: there are other documents that lay such things out. So perhaps this is a better time to ask you: what has changed for you in the nine months since that first re-opening? Does it feel the same?

My hunch is that, for many of us, the gradual emergence from our current situation will be a very different experience. The time of year changes things immediately, of course: we emerge into Spring, and at church we emerge at Easter. As last year, we know that the storm of destruction has not yet fully passed by, and we all continue to need to take appropriate care. But the extraordinary difference that vaccination makes to our surrounding circumstances (so long as new variants don't negate all that's been discovered and produced), means that we can dare even to talk of a kind of resurrection.

But a resurrection to what, exactly? 'Life as it used to be'? I hope not. The Christian belief in resurrection is a belief in transformation as well as restoration. I'm longing for a restoration of song, of course – in worship and in other live music making, but I know it won't be next week. And I hope that restoration is for all of us, and not just for a few privileged performers. As I found myself saying on Black Cat Radio on the Ides of March, 'without being able to sing alongside others, there really is something missing'.

Expressing our thoughts in song (or borrowing the thoughts of others, such as hymnwriters) deepens our emotional engagement, strengthens our memory of what we have said and done, and sometimes gives us a glimpse of something beyond the present moment that – at its most profound – could well be said to be a glimpse of God: and that might well be transformative.

I'm sure we could all add other 'resumptions' that will touch us deeply – many of them involving friends and family; many of them back in favourite places that we have loved long since and lost awhile; many of them giving us a sense of freedom that even in the easiest months of last summer we have not known in nearly two years. We know all these hopes are still quite fragile ones, but each of us probably has at least the beginning of an idea of what a happy return might look like.

It shouldn't surprise us to be reminded that the Bible is built around stories of return. The Christian element there is indeed the Resurrection (prefigured by Lazarus emerging from the tomb), and the return to the New Jerusalem, but the pattern is there before. Jesus' parable of the prodigal son (and the compassionate father) is a story of return that carries echoes of Jacob, and David. Wandering Israelites return to Canaan from a time in Egypt which began with slavery and famine, and included two passages from death to life through the waters of the Red Sea and the Jordan. Jews exiled from the wreckage of a failed state (the Northern Kingdom) and a land ravaged by imperial aggression (Judah), found that the business of return was slow and complex, but it was still a matter of divine promise ('and the ransomed of the Lord shall return to Zion with singing – and sorrow and sighing shall flee away'). We have indeed been here before, and that's why we keep on telling the stories.

## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21**

I have probably written too much here, and will find next month that most of it has, yet again, been overtaken by events. But wouldn't it be good if, for once, our progress to a world restored was an uninterrupted one: and then perhaps we could pay proper attention to habits of consumption that we have not yet learnt to put aside, to patterns of environmental destruction that we continue all to be implicated in, and to battered relationships that really need chance to reform and renew.

A certain poet who one visited a farmyard in our shire famously said “the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time”. These next months may not be an ending, but perhaps they can be a time for new knowing, and new understanding. One can only hope...



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May 2021

I'd like to share a worry of mine. Not to try and make us a more anxious church, but to be a truthful church: some truths don't go away simply by not looking at them. Jesus memorably says, 'let not your hearts be anxious, neither let them be afraid', but he then outlines things that lie ahead.

I could be anxious about the Church's hot political topics: dealing with racism; responding to abuse, recent and non-recent; the crumbling finances of many dioceses. All are real, and demand attention from Church decision-makers. But the one I want to share is closer to home.

Put simply, it is this: throughout the 37 years of my adult life, the parish churches to which I have belonged, lay or ordained; the churches where I have gone to provide organ-playing or ministerial cover; and the churches and cathedrals I have attended when on holiday; have almost all shared the same characteristic. The bulk of the members of that church are 15 years or more older than me.

Now there may have been a small group of people at most of these churches from my generation (perhaps – in more recent years – with their children). There may have been a handful of people who are younger. But none of the many churches that I have known have had more than small groups and handfuls of these.

It doesn't take long to realise that all kinds of church activity are affected by this. Choirs (in the places where such things are not a distant memory) are composed entirely of the retired. Sunday Schools and Parent and Toddler groups are staffed by grandparents (often whose own children have either moved away or are no longer part of the church community). Confirmations become occasional events for a few older adults, or a passing-out parade for the local church school. In the delicate balance between what is familiar and what is new, either the church chooses endless 'newness' that excludes those outside the club or (more likely) it chooses the familiar that speaks with less and less resonance. "We used to..." is always said with a tone of regret, and never as a springboard for new learning or a celebration of how we have moved on.

It seems strange now for me to look back on the church of my late teens and think that its organist was turning 40, its churchwardens were in their 40s and 50s, its large Sunday school was run by people in their 30s and 40s – and that a handful of other churches I visited then had choirstalls packed with children and lots of parents regularly present even though church attendance was no part of qualifying for admission to a particular school.

I have occasionally thought 'is it me and the churches I choose?' But I recall a York Diocesan Synod a couple of years ago when an archdeacon who is my age revealed that at the majority of churches that he had attended in his archdeaconry, he has been among the youngest there.

I know that not every church displays the same trends, but many do. And those of us who are in churches with smaller numbers of the younger groups know that the task of keeping us from reaching a cliff edge is an increasingly urgent one. Jobs stop being carried out. Groups fail. Activities become precarious.

I don't offer a magic wand for such situations, but I'd like to suggest several things that we may need to hold on to.

We need to recognize that the tools and expressions of faith that make some places look more fruitful are not necessarily things that work everywhere. They may be working for a time because they gather the like-minded. But they may yet have insights to offer if we deploy our own judgement and discernment in what we learn.

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We need to be confident of the things in our own traditions that continue to be life-affirming and faith-enhancing, while willing to relinquish some of those things to which we cling for little more than nostalgia's sake. We cannot simply return to how things were for us a generation ago.

We need not to be ashamed of the things that our church has done that have substantially enhanced the lives of many/most in our society. Education, health, social care, community cohesion: all these things are as they are at least partly because of commitments made in faith in recent centuries. There are people who will happily wipe us out of the story.

We need to keep on telling the stories of our faith and our belief. Both are important. Not naively, but with an open mind and a conversational heart. 'What do you think?' is a useful question (though it may not produce a final answer).

And lastly (for this list!), we need to recognize that all the generations of our community are in it together. There are no necessary dividing lines by age. That doesn't mean we don't do things that are age-specific, but it does mean that we affirm always what binds us together as well as what distinguishes us. Saint Paul didn't say 'In Christ there is neither young nor old' but in the face of present circumstances, he might have done!

With my continuing good wishes (not least to those in the midst of substantial transitions of home, work, or family life).

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June 2021

God our Father, Lord of all the world,  
through your Son you have called us  
into the fellowship of your universal Church:  
hear our prayer for your faithful people,  
that in their vocation and ministry  
each may be an instrument of your love,  
and give to your servants now to be ordained  
the needful gifts of grace;  
through our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Before the next edition of the Messenger is published, we will have celebrated no fewer than three landmarks in ordained ministry. One priest, who has been part of our community now for nearly a decade, celebrates the fortieth anniversary of his ordination. A new curate is ordained deacon and welcomed to the beginning of ordained ministry. And a longstanding member of one of our churches is ordained priest to serve people she knows well in a new way. The collect above is used at ordinations and – by chance – a very similar collect is used on the Sunday when the ordinations are happening.

As I write, we don't yet know all the details of any of these events, and all of them will be affected in some way by lockdown-easing decisions that are well beyond our control. But we are determined to \*celebrate\* - whatever the restrictions on our action may be.

Ordinations are lovely occasions, though often rather daunting to those in the middle of them. Sometimes (as with the first ordinations of women as priests, and then as bishops) they are real landmarks in the life of the church. Some of our cathedrals lend these occasions extra majesty (Ely, York and Durham certainly do – I presume St Albans does also), while other places may create real intimacy. Parishes rejoice. Families often (but not always, and it should never be assumed) feel great pride. Dioceses are affirmed as single communities gathered around the Bishop. And the cameras and press releases of Communications Officers go into overdrive too!

But let's look again at the Collect: 'hear our prayer for your faithful people, that in their vocation and ministry each may be an instrument of your love'.

This prayer is not just about those being ordained. It's about all of us. The ordained are given particular tasks, are made to be particular focuses, and are imbued with a distinct character and wisdom for which they have received considerable (and usually quite expensive) training; but the business of vocation and the business of ministry is never just about those robed in white who stand and kneel before the Bishop on ordination day. We are \*all\* to be instruments of God's love.

So, when we celebrate ordination landmarks, we do so with ourselves in mind. The ways in which each of us, lay and ordained, contributes to the overall mission of Christ's church. By prayer, by building community, by service. Some of us pick up particular tasks – parish officers, administration, volunteer co-ordination, accredited lay ministry (and much more) – some of us work out how vocation is lived out in a workplace, in a school or other institutional environment, in a community gathering space or in public communication, in creative activity. Sometimes even ordained people do things away from the gathered church community too!

But the key test of all this activity, of all the time spent maintaining sacred spaces and hallowed traditions, and of all the accumulation of relationships and wisdom is still this: does it act as an instrument of God's love?

Perfect love may cast out fear, but one does not have to be perfect to be an instrument of love. The love that we show others still bears the stamp of our own individual frailties and, like the risen Christ, the mark

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of our wounds. The challenge of being Christ's community is to find a way in which love binds us \*despite\* our differences, so that the love of God shines out. Sometimes the Church has been too broken, too fractured, too compromised, to be able to do that well – but much more often it is community of people who are discovering together what God's love might ask of us in any given situation.

These last fifteen months have been a challenge to all human communities: they have exposed unexpected fault-lines and scars, they have stirred up unexpected feelings that we have not yet been able to work through. The task for all of us is indeed to 'be there' for all of us – sometimes that means special roles for the ordained and accredited, but much more often it means the ordinary things of good human listening, healthy human relationships, and humble, unostentatious celebration. As Robert, Will, and Ann each pass through their particular landmarks, we are the community in which they will discover new things about their calling – and through them we may discover new things about ours. We can't yet know what those new things may be (and it's still too soon to predict anything much) – but what a joy it will be to find them and own them....

Happy Petertide!

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July/August 2021

Back in February, I shared with you a hymn (entitled ‘White Lent’) that had left a strong impression on me in school days, but which I had not sung since. This month, I’d like to share another (with immediate apologies that in two places its language is less inclusive than I would now consider acceptable – its author, Thomas T Lynch, lived from 1818 to 1871): we sang it to the tune of ‘As with gladness’.

Gracious Spirit, dwell with me: I myself would gracious be,  
and with words that help and heal would thy life in mine reveal,  
and with actions bold and meek would for Christ my Saviour speak.

Truthful Spirit, dwell with me: I myself would truthful be,  
and with wisdom kind and clear let thy life in mine appear,  
and with actions brotherly speak my Lord’s sincerity.

Mighty Spirit, dwell with me: I myself would mighty be,  
mighty so as to prevail where unaided man must fail;  
ever by a mighty hope pressing on and bearing up.

Holy Spirit, dwell with me: I myself would holy be;  
separate from sin, I would choose and cherish all things good;  
and whatever I can be, give to him who gave me thee.

I readily admit it’s not the most sophisticated hymn in the hymnbook, but it struck a major chord in 1979 with a 13-year-old at his confirmation on the hill with the finest view of Durham Cathedral, and it’s stuck. I offer it for Will and Ann and they embark on their new ministerial journeys, and for all those who make new commitments of faith, whether baptism, confirmation or stepping into new responsibilities. The four qualities of grace, truth, might, and holiness never cease to be key components of the Christian life, even if the manner in which we show them shifts subtly and gradually with time.

The trouble with these four qualities is that they are easily lost.

We can be so worn down by the trials of life that we forget to be gracious – that we forget how to be gracious. Life becomes all ‘demand’, all ‘self-protection’, all ‘entitlement’, all ‘me’. We lose sight of the needs of those around us as we place ourselves at the centre, and never allow for the possibility that others may have pain about which they cannot talk, and pressures on their life that they cannot explain.

We can be so worn down by the compromises of life that we forget to be truthful. We let ourselves imagine that it’s all right to be a bit ‘broad brush’ about something, or that it doesn’t matter if we blur things that don’t belong together. We tell ourselves that no-one will be too bothered about this or that, or – worse still – that we’ll never be found out, and that no-one will ever be hurt by it.

We can be so worn down by the conflicts of life, that we can cease to understand that ‘might’ is about courage, and confidence, and forbearance; that we descend instead to exploiting unequal power, to bullying, to aggression; that we fail to accept that that strength we do have comes to us as gift.

And, as for holiness, we can begin to imagine that it’s about a narrow purity – about keeping out people who aren’t up to whatever our standards are, about a narrowly defined ethical code which cannot possibly be infringed, an obsession with doing things by the religious book, whatever that book may be.

All of us are constantly being called by God back to grace and truth, holiness and true might. It’s not an easy call, but it’s not simply a call for the specially chosen, or the super-holy. The temptation (as was Jonah’s) is to run away – not necessarily from all the things of God, but sometimes into things about God

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that in fact have little to do with God's real purposes. It's a temptation we all need to resist – not least when it tempts us to demand that 'religion' can only happen in a strictly defined set of limits and according to rigid rules.

I write this before we know whether any further relaxation of restrictions can be taking place on 19th July. We can't know how quickly it can be that we return to doing the things we 'always' did. But perhaps this summer will give us some time to return also to some of the things are most essential to faith. Care for each other; care for the earth; prayer for all...

Lynch's hymn points us, of course, to another text at another time of year -

“And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory... full of grace and truth.” Our learning to be gracious, truthful, mighty and holy is a lifetime's work; it began long ago, but it can always be renewed. Maybe these coming months are a good time...

So... have a good summer!

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September 2021

September is a good time for fresh starts. You don't have to be a schoolteacher/academic or a parent of schoolchildren/students to make it so, though if your life has been ruled by diaries that start in September, it helps!

My last three posts all began with licensings in September – and even my curacy had a fresh start in September, having begun my holiday, two months in, on the day Princess Diana died, and returned to a national church wondering intensely what the previous fortnight had shown us about how we related to wider society.

September 1st also marks the 18-month point in the life of our united parish. Having learnt long ago to try and take a 'where do I want to be in 18 months?' approach to forward planning, I take this landmark seriously. I don't think we would really have wanted to be exactly where we are – but then we have been in the midst of a global pandemic that has by no means yet run its course, and we have just seen, in Afghanistan and in the various climate related catastrophes of the summer, that world continues to be a dangerous and at times frightening place. At times over the last 18 months it's just seemed futile to think of forward planning at all: we can't get beyond \*this week's\* challenge. Jesus had something to say about that of course (think 'lilies of the field'... 'sufficient unto the day'...).

But this really is a good time for fresh starts. Please – if belonging to church has meant something important to you, but somehow a connection has been broken – please consider this month whether there is a way in which you can reconnect with worship or some other form of belonging. We have all had our hands tied: and whilst I have worked with colleagues through the lockdowns to maintain some kind of 'sacred centre', there are many aspects of church life that can only happen if there are \*groups\* of people to make it happen. No incumbent is either omni-competent or omniscient or omni-present (these are attributes that traditional religious philosophy attributes to God, not the clergy!), and there are many things that make both of the ancient parish churches what they are (and make Loves Farm Church what it is) because people have come together to form a common view and make things happen.

So our fresh start is partly about rebuilding congregational relationships. It's also about abandoning fruitless antagonism: the time for saying that two parishes should not be united (a position with which, in this context, I would heartily disagree with anyway) has passed: and there is – to my view – no reason why we can't treasure both togetherness and distinctiveness where each is appropriate. No healthy parish is a monoculture: and there are numerous things in our recent past which already add healthy diversity to our overall identity if we recognize that they are all part of a greater whole. We have two quite distinct church buildings close to each other which can be used in mutually complementary ways if we don't constantly fall into them-v-us thinking at the opening of the conversation. And we have several distinctive groups of people in our worshipping communities whose identities are not necessarily defined by the geography of where they live, or the church which they do or don't come to on a Sunday morning.

Church belonging sits in a wider landscape, of course. Traditional denominations across Western Europe are all in various states of numerical decline – and the growth rates and life cycles of new churches are very variable indeed. As I've observed before, this Anglican parish is one that has the celebration of the eucharist at the heart of its worshipping life, and the convictions that unite the two historic churches are far greater than those that divide them. Without being obstreperously 'traditionalist', we hold firm to our conviction that the longer traditions of the church count for much.

But that shouldn't stop us from looking again to find the tools that can open the right doors for others: to create the times when families or young Christians are at the centre; to create the activities for those for whom 'families' are not the be-all and end-all; to make space for quiet prayer, and prayer for healing, and profound devotion, and transformative artistic and musical activity; to ensure these historic places continue to be the bearers of wider community identity, and work with the grain of the best of the obvious transformations that are happening in the town; to be agents of hope for those who in many different ways

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have been pushed out of the mainstream; to be places where people can come new to the Christian faith and find in it an unexpected richness and depth. Some of that has been going on in quiet and small ways even in the depths of the pandemic, but we need to work towards more overt ways of being that kind church (note the use of the singular here!).

So – I hope you can find something with which to make a fresh start this September. Perhaps I can too.



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October 2021

“What’s your vision for the parish”?

I’ve been asked this question several times in recent months, and I have to say that I don’t find it in any way straightforward to answer. I know that the modern Church likes us to all have Vision Statements (and the rest...), and I know that there are many in the Church who will rush to Proverbs 29.18 and proclaim that ‘where there is no vision, the people perish’. (By the way, some modern translations of Proverbs 29.18 render it a bit differently: NRSV ‘Where there is no prophecy, the people cast off restraint’; REB ‘With no-one in authority, the people cast off all restraint’).

But I instinctively rebel – firstly because I don’t think it’s my business as a parish priest to ‘have a vision’ or to pronounce from on high (or down low) that ‘God’s vision for this place is...’. I’m also not even sure the responsibility rests in the PCC or the body of regular attenders. It might be a business of working with the whole community we serve; it might be a business of recognizing that we are on a journey of discerning what some priorities might be in a world of many competing demands and challenges; and it might be a business of so immersing ourselves deeply in prayer that illumination and direction come through the work of the Spirit. ‘My vision’? I think not.

There are other complexities here, of course: the semi-autonomous nature of the Love’s Farm Church community makes it perfectly possible for the historic churches to be looking in a different direction to maturing but still fresh ventures in the newest part of the parish; the Diocesan boundary along the river and the presence of an Anglican parish of strikingly different character on the other side ask sharp questions of their and our Anglican identities; and the extraordinary experience of the last eighteen months may well have rendered previous hopes less realizable than we once thought.

But I do think I can dare to suggest a few values that already characterize the two historic Anglican church communities of our parish, and offer them as – at the least – a web of connections that make us who we are. I offer them in no particular order.

I think we are called to be a historic community – that comfortably inhabits a millennium of history not because we want to be stuck in a timewarp, but because we think that we may continue to have things to learn from Christian life in the centuries between the writing of the Bible and whatever we define as ‘today’.

I think we are called to be an open and inclusive community, one that – within the limits of Canon Law, but not necessarily accepting that those limits are immutable – welcomes people in regardless of age, gender, race, language, dis-/ability, sexuality or identity, embodying the open and inclusive love of God.

I think we are called to be a humble community – one that identifies with the self-emptying of God in Jesus, and is looking always to be alongside others in shared wrestling with the problems of the world, always open to being taught by others, and to discovering new truths with others. Sometimes grand buildings make it just a bit harder to remember that calling – and we need always to remember that however majestic our spaces, we hold them on trust for wider communities and bigger pictures than any we can draw, and for purposes far wider than our own club needs.

I think we are called to be a mutually caring community, where trust is sufficient for struggles and doubts to be aired openly. That doesn’t mean that every secret must be laid bare (it’s God’s business to know such things, not ours), or that proper confidences can be broken, but it does mean that we recognize that compassion and forgiveness have a central place in our life together.

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I think we are called to be a servant community – rolling up our sleeves alongside others to meet the needs of the stranger, the broken, the excluded and the poor in the world (and not just ‘at home’) as best we can

I think we are called to be a confident community – not confident that we have all the right answers, or even confident in a rather shallow clichéd way that ‘it’s all in God’s hands’, but rather confident (even when clinging on by our fingernails) that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Jesus.

And – perhaps hardest of all – I think we are called to be an innovative community, following the One who makes all things new: not a community that is a slave to fashion, or runs after every novelty – but one which is continually striving to find fresh ways of touching the lives of others for good; one that is always looking for new ways to sing God’s praises and gather others into that act of praise.

This quick list is, of course, a brief work-in-progress. Just like a shopping trip, one can easily start adding to what’s on the list. But I hope it makes a start in a longer conversation...

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November 2021

“Vision and Values: so - what next?”

Last month, I gave a hesitant response to the idea that I might have to ‘have a vision’, but then offered a ‘work in progress’ list of seven values that might already characterize our two historic Anglican church communities:

- a historic community;
- an open and inclusive community;
- a humble community;
- a mutually caring community;
- a servant community;
- a confident community;
- an innovative community.

I might have added three more - truthful; trustworthy; environmentally responsible – that seemed too obvious to mention at that time: if seven is a good Biblical number, ten is an even better one!

But what is the practical outworking of these values? Some of it is in the particular ways we organize our community activities; some of it is in the ways we treat others as individuals made in the image of God; and some of it is in the way we use and shape our buildings (so that we are not excessively shaped by them).

It’s this latter issue that I would like to spend some time with this month – and to do so on this occasion (with apologies to Eynesbury folk) with a focus on the St Neots buildings.

I really want to talk about the glorious Grade I listed Parish Church, of course – the only Grade One listed building in the town – but it’s worth mentioning in passing the excellent work that has been done by the Church Rooms Committee (a Sub Committee of the Parochial Church Council) to refresh parts of that building, and to identify what further works we would like to see done there imminently and in the longer term. Part of that work has been the clear identification what the building is and isn’t now fit for, as well as small steps to make the building easier to use while we continue to have to take Covid-19 related precautions. Let’s hope we can take things further there soon.

But, turning to the Parish Church, I do think it’s worth asking whether we currently have a building that serves well our desire to communicate our history; whether we have a building with a layout that facilitates openness and inclusivity; and whether the grandeur of the building allows a proper humility about its purpose. Is it a space in which we can properly care for each other? Is it a place in which we can serve not only the needs of worship, but the wider needs of a growing and changing town that continues to search for its future identity? Are the objects that we find within something which inspire confidence in what has been here, or apologetic regret? Are the decisions we make about church property ever characterized by innovation, or only by the most static kind of ‘holy neglect’ that masquerades as preservation?

With the three extra values that I’ve added, we might also ask whether our building is truthful about the wide range of its purposes (historically and currently); whether it can be trusted to serve those purposes reliably; and whether it has been arranged in a way that best copes with the environmental issues facing us. To pick up just one example of those issues from the last week – are we really served well by a West Door that sits in a pit so that torrential rains that land there will flood straight into the Tower area and create a pond on the floor around the Font?

The time is coming when – in partnership with a new inspecting architect who has recently identified for us the small number of things that are urgent and very urgent – we start to think about the bigger picture with these values at our heart. I am well aware that consideration of such issues has been a recurrent

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feature of much of the last fifty years: but it also seems clear to me that St Neots Parish Church as a building does not yet serve well its church community and its rapidly growing town in the diverse ways that it should.

The substance of the conversations that are to come hasn't really begun to be opened up. It seems clear to me that it cannot be a case of 'picking up where we left off', but rather that we start with fundamentals – heating, floors, seating, drainage, space, access, design – before we become too distracted by what is then layered on top.

I'd love to show you places that I know where people have looked very hard at making the best of their heritage in a way that is in tune with the values with which I began here. My trouble is that the places which comes to mind are all at quite some distance! St Neots Parish Church cries out for a thoroughgoing review of what is significant and important in the building, and how it can best serve the communities who will be here in the decades to come.

But this is probably really a conversation for 2022. There's quite a lot going on in the world that will make it enough for now to reach the end of 2021 intact, as well as the yearly turn towards sombre Remembrance that is the character of the first half of November. I hope it's a good month for you.

## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger (and The Archway, in lockdown) 2020-21**

December 2021 / January 2022

This Christmas Eve, it will be forty years since, as a young tenor of one year's experience, I donned a cassock and surplice for the first time to sing in a church choir. I was borrowing the robes of another older singer who I hadn't yet met who 'doesn't now come at midnight' and it was also the first time I had been to a midnight Eucharist. I remember nothing of the singing, but I do remember that the church was full enough for some people to have to sit on extra chairs at the back of the transepts. Those days are long gone, of course.

I can't escape associations of Christmas with Choral singing. Two years before that (42 is another biblically significant number, by the way - see the number of generations before Jesus in the opening verses of Matthew's gospel) I had put on robes with members of my school choir for a Tyne Tees TV Carol special (a copy of which probably exists in an archive somewhere): the choir included the previous year's Chorister of the Year. Two years after that, the last hour of my school days was spent singing in a carol service in Durham Cathedral, and one year later I played the organ at the start of the midnight Eucharist for the first time.

Since then, playing and singing for Christmas services has been pretty much unavoidable for me, both in churches where I have been a member or on the staff, and in churches that have been close by and in need of assistance - and for my first Christmas in St Neots I found myself taking the organ stool at both churches on rather short notice thanks to COVID19 isolation requirements! When I took my leave of the people of Stokesley, I did it in a service for the Epiphany that included the celebration of a musical collaboration with our Roman Catholic neighbours which has much enriched both our celebrations over the previous five years.

I indulge in this autobiography to illustrate that each of us carries memories of our own routines for Christmas. When I was a child, big extended family gatherings were quite normal, but for a variety of reasons, these reduced considerably by my teenage years. On the other hand, I have never been in a church which has had a big social programme at Christmastime, serving lunches to the needy or lonely, and so it features much less in my sense of a 'good Christmas'. Each of us has our own ideas (completely independent of our theological understanding of the meaning of the feast), and year by year we measure our Christmas by what has gone before. This year, I think we all know that somethings will not be quite the same. But we may not yet know what those things might be.

Chances are that you will be reading this at the start of Advent. Christmas will still be four weeks away, and whether you think that the whole of December is in some sense 'Christmas' or you cling to the idea (against our prevailing culture) that Advent is a time of focused preparation on other, bigger things, you will know that you have other things yet to achieve before we reach December 25th. The rather medieval Advent theme of the Four Last Things (Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell) may not feature strongly in your thinking, but you may nonetheless be looking for a healthy dose of the Advent Hope: the hope that the world is being remade in Christ, the hope that the Kingdom of God will be seen more clearly in our midst, the hope that the life of our Saviour will have more lasting impact upon the life of our society and the lives of our contemporaries.

So, I hope this December gives you cause for celebration, cause for joy, cause for hope. And, if music is your thing (as it is for me), I hope it's a special time. And then... I hope January is not too much of an anticlimax (as it can sometimes be).

A very hopeful Advent, a happy Christmas, and a flourishing New Year!