

The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2022

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.

To repeat what I wrote earlier this year, we 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. As the UK government lifted the last elements of legal restriction (not that the virus had gone away), Russian troops invaded Ukraine. In late 2022, they are still there. And we have seen considerable turmoil in the life of our government this year: I would not have expected three years ago that my then MP would be Prime Minister so soon!



I continue to make no claims to great profundity or wit in these articles. There are a small number of spelling and typographical mistakes in these articles that were not caught at the time of writing (and one article where they were deliberate). They have not been corrected for this collection.

Paul Hutchinson
November 2022

About the Author

The Revd Paul Hutchinson became Priest in Charge of the two separate parishes of St Neots and Eynesbury on Sunday 26th January 2020. By a Pastoral Scheme dated 11th February, the two parishes were united with effect from March 1st 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 2022

‘In the third year...’

On January 26th, I entered my third year of ministry here; we are now also in the third calendar year of our life as a single parish with a developing ministry team. I wonder if there is any wisdom to offer for this moment.

It’s worth (as ever) starting with the Bible. Thanks to the resurrection, ‘on the third day’ is a deeply resonant phrase in the New Testament. The ‘third year’ is less resonant, but there are – I have learnt – a dozen or so places in the Old Testament where it is used as the time marker for an event of some significance. Some of those events (such as in the Books of Kings) are turns for the worse in Israel’s history; some of them (see Daniel) are times of weird visions of the future; some of them are moments when good comes out of a time of trial (perhaps most obviously when the drought in the time of Elijah is ended at the time of his confrontation with the prophets of Baal). But I can’t say there’s a clear trend.

My experience of ‘third years’ when I was so much younger than today is that they were often times of challenge and change. For me that included the final year of both spells of Higher Education, and decision time in each of my first four jobs. In both of my more recent posts the third year has been a year in which the landscape shifted substantially (for very different reasons), though my time in each was not shortened by those shifts.

There is a certain folk wisdom that suggests that the third year is when things ‘settle down’, after a year of familiarization, and a year of testing the boundaries and tensions. In a well-known model of ‘forming, storming, norming, and performing’, the third year might be the time when the storming is completed, and when new norms are settled and real progress is made.

But these have not been normal times: familiarization and growth have been badly warped by external circumstances. Lots of invisible processes that build mutual trust (and not just in the relationship between new priest and the congregations) have been skewed by lockdowns and more. There’s a residual sense that some things ‘haven’t really got going yet’ (there are two Sundays in the church calendar on which I have not been in church in either year, for starters), and opportunities haven’t always come easily to manage or explain change, or to encourage fruitful multi-party conversation.

I would like to hope that this third year – for me and for the parish – becomes a time of real recovery. A recovery of a sense of who we *all* are together, however we fit into the worshipping and serving community. A recovery of the energy that brought two parishes together and looked for growth through the Changing Market Towns project. A recovery of confidence in being part of our worshipping communities, and finding delight in being physically present at worship, study, prayer and social activity.

We have not yet reached the end of you-know-what, of course. We may find that it still has things to inflict upon us. We may also find that the difficult economic path ahead of us (thinking of general inflation, fuel costs, more difficult employment prospects and the like), even in the relatively prosperous part of the country that this is, will also create obstacles to our hopefulness. Who really knows about any of this?

But – returning to the Bible – I do think that there is some scriptural encouragement to be had in the year to come. If we look not at the ‘third year’ but the ‘third time’, we find a different set of stories. Samuel receives wisdom from Eli on the third occasion that he thinks that Eli calls. Elijah sees the miracle on Mount Carmel after the sacrifice is drenched for the third time. Peter understands his weakness on the third time he denies Jesus, and then receives his true commission after his answer to Jesus asking him for the third time ‘Do you love me?’ Jesus understands his vocation to the Cross in the third time he prays in Gethsemane. And in 2 Corinthians, Saint Paul is very conscious that he is about to visit Corinth for the

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third time to deal with problems in community life (problems which we presume to have been resolved because the letters have been preserved for us!).

We can guess at some of the changes that will lie ahead in this 'third time round'. We have just learnt that later in the year we will have a new archdeacon (it was announced on 23rd January that Archdeacon Hugh McCurdy will step down from that role in April, though he will stay connected with 'Changing Market Towns' and other Diocesan mission activities). We will engage in some Deanery Planning which will adjust some of our local relationships. But the most important changes in the coming year may well still be hidden from all of us: changes that may enrich our life together and may open up unexpected opportunities to grow in new ways. Let's hope it's not too long before we can see such things – and then make the best of them!

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March 2022

Keeping Confidence

Over the last twenty years, there have been many church reports and strategy papers in a variety of areas that have been given snappy two-word titles. Often the first word ends in ‘-ing’ or is hyphenated, the second is an abstract noun. ‘Mission-shaped Church’ is a famous example of the hyphenated kind. The ‘-ing’ kind are more common, and the words are often chosen to offer a mystery: is the first word an adjective or a participle? One report I saw frequently nearly two decades ago was called ‘Transforming Worship’: was the report about making changes to worship, or about worship that transforms us, or both at the same time? Often authors that choose such titles want us to explore both avenues and see how they relate to each other. So the Archbishop’s Lent Book & challenge this year (both written by Isabelle Hamley, his recent chaplain) are called ‘Embracing Justice’ and beg the question whether it is we who embrace justice or justice that takes hold of us.

So I’ve chosen just such a title this month, but the dual meaning works a little differently. ‘Keeping’ is a verb both times, but the double meaning of ‘confidence’ is what’s in play here.

There are many situations and professions in which ‘keeping confidence’ is a fundamental part of what all of us are called to do. In my life, I have encountered it most obviously in two professions (lawyer and priest – note that ‘profession’ has multiple meanings too: a level of skill; whether we’re paid; or a verbal commitment!), but also in the role of school governor, and in other particular tasks. It’s not exactly the same as ‘secrecy’, but those who work in a variety of medical and caring professions, and those who hold public office, also have to learn what can rightly be shared with others, and what must be kept away from public discourse. The opposite of ‘keeping’ is ‘breaking’, and the situations in which breaking confidence is appropriate are very limited indeed (certain safeguarding or whistleblowing situations being the most obvious in contemporary discourse). Some ‘breaking’ of confidence might even properly be called ‘abusing’ confidence and trust. So material that is expected to be held confidentially is not to be lightly deployed to whatever ends the recipient pleases. Confidences require conscience...

We can learn about the proper keeping of confidence by a careful digestion of detailed rules and specific guides to situations; we can become people whose character naturally leans toward keeping confidence; or we can mix both skills. The training of lawyers and priests is a mixture of both approaches, though the skills of judging fine lines here may sometimes be worn down by excessive stress, or deliberate malicious attrition.

Lent is a good time for revisiting the discipline of keeping confidence. Lent is a time for discipline, and the keeping of confidences (plural) is just as much a discipline as dietary abstention, or restraint from certain actions.

But it’s not just the first meaning of confidence that’s in play. The second sort of confidence – the inner disposition that looks and hopes for the best, that knows its ground, that will stand up for what’s right – that’s a confidence that all Christians are called to keep, even if their faith is sometimes struggle, and their experience of life is painful and hard. This confidence is a confidence not in our own personal faithfulness, but in the faithfulness of our Creator, and the faithfulness of the one sent among us to reconcile us to that Creator. It’s what enables St Paul to say ‘I am convinced... that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord’, and earlier in Romans has him saying to us that ‘endurance produces character which produces hope’.

The confident Christian is not the one who has all the answers, and knows all the rules. The confident Christian is the one who understands that God will keep on revealing purposes to us by all manner of means - to deepen our understanding of how the world is, and our capacity to be beacons of God’s light. The confident Christian doesn’t tell you their confidence, they show you their confidence in God even in

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their times of struggle and darkness. I have seen it recently in some approaching death, in some in situations of great personal challenge, in some who are accepting of a journey of vocation, identity or sexuality despite cultural pressure to tread another path.

The Psalms are, of course, full of confidence – even though they are also full of doubt, and despair, and regret, and pain. Some of that confidence comes in the joy of knowing the word of the Lord, some of that confidence comes through a sense of God's presence, some of it comes through realizing the right pathway through a tangled forest ahead of us, and some of it comes through knowing we are part of a community of love.

So, this Lent – might you work a little harder at keeping confidence? Little by little, it might just change the world!

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April 2020

April is the cruellest month for writing parish magazine articles (as T.S.Eliot didn't quite say 100 years ago this year). The chances are that you will read this around three weeks before Easter and, unlike – for example – the Radio Times Christmas Issue, there's nothing gained by over-egging the run-up to the 'big day'. I've written elsewhere in this issue about Holy Week services, and I don't feel inclined to add to that here. And if I dare to offer a comment about Ukraine (who hasn't?) it will almost certainly be overtaken by events somewhere between typing and publishing: I learnt as much from Covid (personal experience, you understand, and not simply something I read on social media).

You may be surprised to learn that this is the first time in ministry that I have turned out an article of this nature every month. I haven't been writing the same thing since 1965 (as can sometimes seem the case in parish magazines). Perhaps that lends my articles a certain 'freshness' (if you're being polite) or a 'what's he going on about this time?' (if honesty wins). I have no grand scheme of what I want to say to you month by month, only a desire for you neither to give a teenager's shrug in the second line nor to utter a spine-tingling shout of "boring!" in the third. I had schoolfriends who were (and still are) much more gifted in the field of literary entertainment than I am, and I know my efforts to be more than purely prosaic can sometimes breed more confusion than amusement (see my end-of-services notices, *passim*). All I have to do here to complete such a process is make some reference to 'Bambi', Sir Hugh Roberton, obscure bell-ringing methods and folk longing to go on pilgrimage.**

I have written and said enough in the last two years for regular readers to know that History is one of my greatest passions (and has been since...). It's the subject that I took furthest before turning to read Law at University, and it's the love that I consciously chose not to overindulge in my choice between two different Theology courses the second time round. The historian in me wants to tell you more about St Anselm, whose feast falls on the Queen's actual birthday (April 21st), who played such a large part in creating a community we now call St Neots, but whose day is another (like Chad's and Cuthbert's) that's evicted from our celebrations by our calendar rules this year. But maybe this isn't the place, and maybe pure history would too easily provoke the teenager's cry.

So what's left for me to do at the start of this cruellest month? As I look out of my study window (spot the parish magazine cliché), I occasionally see parked motor vehicles, but I'm sure you wouldn't want me to attempt a new career as a motoring correspondent. There must be something more...

Well perhaps there is, though whether it will have any more durability than a chocolate bunny's foil wrapper remains to be seen. We live in uncertain times, as someone said recently. So – set down this:-

The late Archbishop Desmond Tutu was fond of saying, often, a prayer/hymn that he had written:

“Goodness is stronger than evil;
love is stronger than hate;
light is stronger than darkness;
life is stronger than death.
Victory is ours through him who loved us”.

If April isn't about this (whether Easter has already happened or we have to wait for it) then which month of the year can be? Some church members live lives that suggest they may never recognize this truth; but for most of us, Tutu's words are the bedrock of why we keep on turning up – to church, to those we love, to God. Let's be a people in whom this truth is manifest all the year through. An egg, after all, is for life – and not just for Easter.

(Fr) Paul.

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- 'Bambi' includes the song 'Drip drip drop little April shower'
- Sir Hugh Robertson (1874-1952), conductor of the Glasgow Orpheus Choir, wrote the music for 'All in an April Evening' (words: Katharine Tynan)
- 'April Day' is a bell-ringing method occasionally rung on five bells.
- Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Canterbury Tales' begin with a Prologue, of which lines 1,2, and 12 are (roughly translated from Middle English) "When April with his sweet showers has pierced the drought of March to the root... then folk long to go on pilgrimages".
- 'The Waste Land' was one of T.S.Eliot's more important early poems, and was written in 1922 – it begins 'April is the cruellest month...'

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May 2022

Now is eternal life, if risen with Christ we stand...

Last month, I ended this article with the words: “an egg ... is for life – and not just for Easter”. I was, of course, playing with an old RSPCA slogan about dogs and Christmas; and allowing some double meanings to creep in. Eggs (not the chocolate kind) are always laden with the promise of life, whether fertilization turns promise into fulfilment or not. And the Easter Egg (whether paste/pace/pasche or chocolate) comes to us as a reminder of the promise of eternal life, laid down for us, but for now hidden, in Jesus’ resurrection. As the hymn whose opening line is above puts it “our life is hid with God in thee, now and through all eternity”.

One of the great tasks of the Easter season – apart from not putting on chocolate-induced weight – is to take an eternal and external ‘promise’ of life, and make it into the reality of life now: to internalize it; make the green blade rise from the buried grain; to let the love that made us come again and warm our hearts.

One of the processes that our weekly worship can work within us is the process of dwelling in – and not simply hearing – the stories of the encounters with the risen Jesus. In the first half of the Easter Season all of the stories of resurrection meetings are prescribed for somewhere in our Sunday worship – but as we are congregations who normally attend only one Sunday service, it takes several years for all the stories to come round in the Sunday morning cycle. Our Easter celebration starts with an encounter with the empty tomb (and the strange loose ends that its emptiness first seems to leave), but moves into the great but strange meetings:

- (Jn) Mary Magdalene in the Garden
- (Jn) The disciples with and without Thomas in the Upper room
- (Lk) The two who walk to Emmaus and break bread
- (Lk) The disciples to whom Jesus appears and eats in their presence
- (Mt) The meeting as the disciples return from the tomb
- (Mt) The instruction on the mountain in Galilee
- (Jn) The disciples back with their fishing
- (Jn) Peter’s threefold confession of love
- (Jn) The question of how long the Beloved Disciple will live,

not to mention the stories of the ascension, Paul’s various later retellings of his encounter with the risen Jesus, the visions from the Revelation to John, and the tales from Acts of the early Church’s life in the Spirit.

Each of those stories gives us the possibilities of placing ourselves there, of letting Jesus speak to us; to call us by name, to tell us how we are blessed even though we have not seen, to meet us in the breaking of the bread, to let us take in the way he carries his wounds, to direct us onward, to encourage us to make disciples ourselves, to cast out further, to profess our love, and to understand that our calling may well be distinctive, for it matters not what the person beside us finds themselves called to do.

I have found over the years that different moments, words, and actions can speak differently over time. Sometimes it’s right to fall to our knees (more metaphorically than literally these days) and join Thomas in proclaiming Jesus as our Lord and God. Sometimes it’s good to respond ‘Yes, Lord, you know that I love you’. Sometimes we need to remind ourselves that what others may or may not do is not our primary calling – ‘You – you follow me!’ Experience tells us that in any Easter season we will not necessarily be moved by the same moments in the same way each year.

So the business of making the glimpse of eternal life in Christ real now is never a matter of a cold reaffirmation of the event we call the resurrection. Rather, it’s allowing the impact that it had on Jesus’s first disciples to speak to us and be reflected in our lives. When God acts in raising Jesus, and when Jesus

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appears, these events speak to us because of the third limb of the story as St John particularly tells it to us: the Spirit is breathed upon us, and our hearts are (in Wesley's words) strangely warmed.

It's not many weeks into the Easter season before we leave those stories behind and look at other words of Jesus: his words to the disciples in the upper room; words that promise us that he is the Way, the Truth and the Life. But while we have the stories, it's good to keep on immersing ourselves in them. In that immersion, the risen Jesus can continue to speak - to us, and in us.

Two years ago, in his weekly articles for his church in Cambridge during the first lockdown, Rowan Williams wrote this: "When we say that Jesus is risen, we mean that there is no sense in which he belongs to the past; his life is never over ... there is nowhere and no-when that is simply 'waste' because the living Jesus is present and active wherever we turn".

So I hope that in this Easter season we each find the right opportunity to stand with Christ now, to face Christ, to let Christ affirm new steps in our lives. It could prove to be the moment when his risen life becomes ours too, when the unfathomed love divine does dwell in our hearts, and when Christ's eternity speaks truly into our present reality.

Continued Easter blessings!

(Fr) Paul.

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June 2022

Oh, I do like to be beside the see-side!

I'll come to the apparent spelling-mistake later...

As someone who grew up within easy reach of the sea, I have always valued the ability to reach a beach in a short journey, and missed that when - in Oxford, Penrith, and now here - an extended day-trip has been the minimum necessary.

It's an experience many of us share, I think. Though the sea has its dangers (and the Hebrew Bible is shot through with images of sea as a force of chaos and destruction), many of us find refreshment either at its shore, or swimming in it (not me), or sailing or cruising upon it.

When I was away on the eastern Norfolk-Suffolk border, on a few reflective days in the middle of May, I noticed at the end that a number of clergy from this part of the world had made up their mind to head to the Lowestoft / Suffolk coast before they made the two-hour plus drive home. Refreshment was not complete without sea air, and I think they will all have valued it: but I passed over that particular experience, knowing I would have other opportunities imminently.

Some of you have also been telling me of your recent coastal experiences – more east than west, on the whole, but I have detected in them all a love of the places you have found, especially if they have been new to you. Some of you even share the love of the same coasts that I do. Excellent taste!

Oh I do like to stroll along the prom, prom, prom...

I'm writing this the day after the choir trip to St Leonard's on Sea (which is the western half of the town of Hastings, and not to be confused, as I temporarily did, with Bexhill on Sea, the next town along the coast). It was such a joy to sing with the choir in an awesome Victorian building that was the vision of a former Vicar of St Neots, Charles Lyndhurst Vaughan (vicar here 1854-65), for the edification of the working classes in the locality. But it was also a joy to have time to walk the prom right to the east end of town, and then over the two hills and through the three town centres back to base. There's something about Hastings that reminds me of Scarborough, Whitby and the Cleveland coast, and I felt unaccountably more at home than I had expected.

But you can't go to the British seaside without being conscious too of more challenging stories. Many of our large coastal towns are marked out by acutely high levels of deprivation; our coast is the place where industrial pollution and plastic waste have a regular habit of washing ashore; and in recent times, our coastal waters have been the particular focus of the politics of immigration. Not every stroll along the prom is a happy one.

Seaside places are, of course, places on the edge. Sometimes, that edge-ness gives us refreshment, but sometimes it can offer us a clearer view of the inequalities and challenges of our society. Hastings can give us fresh air, but it can also renew our resolve to engage in a battle that's rather more recent than 1066. If only we have eyes to see.

Which brings me to my spelling 'mistake'. Here in St Neots we may be a long way inland, but we are on the edge of the see – the Diocese of Ely. We are, of course, a river resort of sorts to which people come in boats and caravans for refreshment; but that river (which is the Diocesan boundary through the town) invites us both to recognize the difference of the land beyond (looking, as it does, to St Albans, and in secular terms once out of town to Bedford and the City of Milton Keynes), and also the distance that we can feel from central decision-making.

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But just as coastal resorts can never completely isolate themselves from the communities inland, so we cannot really separate ourselves from the bigger questions of our Diocese and County. The deep challenges of rural poverty, magnified in rural towns (some of which do come to pockets of our own town); the development pressures on South Cambridgeshire (into which we clearly also fall); the growing indifference to the Church almost everywhere – these are all issues that sometimes allow us, on the edge, to view them with greater clarity. We can wander along the prom and imagine that life here is easier and lighter, or we can look inland and see that there is a task in which we need to collaborate. Changing Market Towns, Deanery Mission Planning, and thinking about the best use of our buildings are all part of that, and never to be seen in isolation.

My time away, both in Norfolk and in St Leonard's on Sea, has given opportunities to blow some air through the many things that have been going round in my head. I'm not sure it's given me any easy answers, but I hope it allows us to begin to see a few things a little differently. Maybe the months ahead will make somethings plain to us all: and bring renewal and hope in the process.

Yet more Easter blessings (it's not over till the fiery Spirit sings)!

(Fr) Paul.

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July 2022

May you reach old age in the company of friends!

Scattered across the many forms of service that the Church of England authorized for use at the beginning of the Millennium (and the seemingly endless torrent of words in some), there are odd phrases that jump off the page. Some of them were the creation of the poet David Frost in the early 1970s, some of them were freshly created in the years around 2000 (perhaps echoing ancient spiritual writing), and some were borrowed from the work that had been done in other Anglican provinces (we are, after all, in communion with provinces all around the globe – as the Lambeth Conference later this month will remind us).

The lovely blessing that I have written above is part of one of the alternative prayers for the blessing of a marriage. Shorter than the blessing in the main order for marriage (less couched in biblical images that may not resonate with many couples, and less repetitive of things said in both opening collect and intercessions), it comes to us from New Zealand. The whole prayer is as follows:

All praise and blessing to you, God of love, creator of the universe, maker of man and woman in your likeness, source of blessing for married life. All praise to you, for you have created courtship and marriage, joy and gladness, feasting and laughter, pleasure and delight.
May your blessing come in full upon N and N. May they know your presence in their joys and in their sorrows. May they reach old age in the company of friends and come at last to your eternal kingdom, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

The whole prayer has much to say about the qualities of a good marriage, but the line about the ‘company of friends’ strikes me as one which reaches out well beyond the boundaries of a particular marriage, and well beyond the confines of marriage itself.

But staying with marriage for a little longer, it seems to me that good marriages are built upon both a primary friendship between the couple that is far more than just romantic love, and also a web of friendships that sustain the couple through many transitions. That web of friendship is often what informs the choice of godparents, it shapes decisions about anniversaries and events, it gives richness at times when many things feel poor and flat.

But it’s not just married couples who will be blessed by reaching old age in the company of friends. The blessing of friendship is one that is for all – even (perhaps especially) for those who have a strong tendency towards being reclusive.

Three great saints - Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Aelred (third and greatest Abbot of Rievaulx) – wrote at length about the value of friendship in the spiritual life. It’s not an exclusively Christian concept, of course (Aquinas’ writings are heavily based on Aristotle, the pre-Christian Greek philosopher), but it sits at the heart of Christian life. Friendship is built upon a mixture of love and reason – and the friendship that we grow (and grow into) with fellow humans becomes the fertile ground in which we learn how to be friends of God.

If the Hebrew Scriptures are littered with stories of deep and lasting friendships – alongside the deep hurts of friendships broken or terminated by death (think of David and Jonathan, or Ruth and Naomi, though many others could come to mind) – St John’s Gospel and first Epistle are well known as the places where friendship (sometimes in the guise of mutual love) is most clearly laid out in the New Testament. In John, Jesus tells the disciples they are no longer servants but friends, and that no-one has greater love than to lay down a life for a friend.

Churches are places where the value of friendship should be celebrated and embodied in congregational life. Not the friendship of closed cliques and mutually exclusive (and sometimes antagonistic) groups – but

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the open-ended friendship that draws others in, not because they are sufficiently 'like us', but because their difference enriches who we are. Friendship and the capacity to make it are what distinguish warm and healthy churches from cold and distant ones. And the more cross-generational those friendships can be (especially in an age which has been stratifying society by age cohorts for decades), the more that people can be brought into new friendship with God.

We have many things to work on in these coming months. In the midst of them, let's not lose the idea that friendship is still one of the things to be cultivated – however long we've had our closest friends, however timid we feel about opening new relationships. We all need to reach old age in the company of friends; and even if some of us sadly may – in all likelihood – not reach that old age, nevertheless our friendships need to keep nurturing us to the end, and to keep preparing us for that ultimate friendship which is eternal life in God's near presence. May this summer be a time when your friendships are indeed renewed, and when through that faith is restored.

(Fr) Paul.

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September 2022

Thee will I love...

You may have noticed that I have an old-fashioned vice of being fond of quoting hymns. So many of them have provided us with one-line summaries of key points of belief, or have conjured up an image that expands or diversifies the images available from Scripture or from traditional art.

So I make no apology for occasionally bringing to light a hymn that I sang when I was young that seems to have fallen completely out of common repertoire. This month's is another of those that, in the middle of the twentieth century, the BBC Hymn Book and the school/church hymn book 'Songs of Praise' made widely known. Many of them now seem to belong to a different world (just as the 1974/5 television episode of Songs of Praise filmed in St Neots in Stanley Griffiths' time – which I've seen recently – also belongs to that different world). But so do most of the classics of British literature, and that doesn't stop us from reading them.

So – here's the hymn I have in mind. It's loosely based on Psalm 138, and it's written by the great former Poet Laureate Robert Bridges (1844-1930). I'm sure you'll hear echoes of his better-known hymn 'All my hope on God is founded'; and if you have sung it, I suspect you will find Cecil Armstrong-Gibb's tune 'Crossings' going through your head as you read it. But enjoy it for itself: I don't think it deserves to be consigned to the dust of historical archive, or is dependent on its tune alone.

1 Thee will I love, my God and King;
thee will I sing, my strength and tower;
for evermore thee will I trust,
O God most just of truth and power,
who all things hast in order placed,
yea, for thy pleasure hast created;
and on thy throne, unseen, unknown,
reignest alone in glory seated.

2 Set in my heart thy love I find;
my wand'ring mind to thee thou leadest;
my trembling hope, my strong desire
with heav'nly fire thou kindly feedest.
Lo, all things fair thy path prepare;
thy beauty to my spirit calleth,
thine to remain, in joy or pain,
and count it gain whate'er befalleth.

3 O more and more thy love extend,
my life befriend with heav'nly pleasure,
that I may win thy Paradise,
thy pearl of price, thy countless treasure.
Since but in thee I can go free
from earthly care and vain oppression,
this prayer I make for Jesus' sake,
that thou me take in thy possession.

Now I know there are features of Robert Bridges' verse that don't age especially well. His habit in many hymns – shared with prayers written in his era – of using old verb forms (here: 'hast', 'reignest', 'leadest', 'feedest', 'calleth', 'befalleth') distances us a bit more from the sentiments than we might like. But the hymn is still a heartfelt song of thanks, trust and praise to a gracious creator. Robert Bridges' habit of focusing

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more on the majestic but distant Father might lead us occasionally to want a bit more of ‘Christ the Son’ (in ‘All my Hope’ Christ makes a late appearance in the final verse, just as Jesus is mentioned finally here). But the hymn is very firmly directed to God, and not distracted by what we might call ‘the cares of the world’.

But, putting these things aside, I think Bridges has indeed given us a pearl of great price, a treasure incapable of being counted or valued. Do enjoy it!

(Fr) Paul.

P.S. I did wonder whether it would be more appropriate to write here about the outcomes of the Lambeth Conference, or about our July recommitment to membership of the ‘Inclusive Church’ organization, or of practical things in relation to both our church buildings, or of the rapid development of the ‘Cost of Living’ crisis, or of the state of international relations, or about the particular challenges of the forthcoming academic year, or about the celebrations that are planned for the middle and end of September. But the time and place for all these things is either elsewhere in the magazine, or another forum altogether. Rather like Peter asking Jesus (in John 21) what will eventually happen to the Beloved Disciple, sometimes we need to be told ‘never you mind – you just follow me!’. Robert Bridges’ hymn keeps us focused on that following, that seeking, and the finding that then happens. May you find something which strengthens you on your journey of faith, and brings you safe to God’s heavenly country where peace and harmony reign!

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October 2022

“Lord of all eagerness, Lord of all faith,
whose string hands were skilled at the plane and the lathe”

It is often joked that no Order of Service is complete without a clerical error.

If you were unable to be present at our Service of Thanksgiving commemorating her late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II on the eve of her funeral, you will have missed the pleasure of a smile in the middle of a much-loved hymn. Would string hands be made by crocheting, knitting, weaving, knotting, or some other form of construction, I wonder?

It's good that we can sometimes smile at our mistakes. There have been others recently in service orders and notice sheets that have appeared because of errors in nationally produced resources – perhaps they're not quite so funny. But there are plenty more which are the stuff of parish magazine joke pages too.

Sometimes, however, a spelling mistake can offend (especially if it's a common mis-spelling of a well-known name, or a failure to take care with something that's in an unfamiliar language), and a punctuation mistake can totally up-end the meaning (the latter being so memorably encapsulated in Lynne Truss's famous book title 'Eats, shoots and leaves' – which, as we all know, is what a panda does).

It's always difficult to be a successful self-proofreader. Few of us can spot all our own mistakes. But there is grate honour in being able - with speed, efficiency, and kindness – to find others' errors before they go to print, and equally greet irritation when as a reader you find that a printed text is littered with easily correctable faults.

The computer word-processing programme with a spell-check and an auto-correct function has much to answer for, of course. I suspect many of us have become lazier typists since these tools became widespread, and – if we're in a hurry – are too ready to assume that the absence of red lines means that all the words are the correct ones. Experience tells us this is not so.

Does it matter in the life of faith? I think it does. A major fourth century theological dispute in theological understandings of the Trinity and Incarnation (that created divisions that still exist in the Christian church) rested on two words that were a letter distant: 'homo-ousios' and 'homoi-ousios' (explanation available on request, preferably made to someone with a Doctorate of Divinity); and a word near the end of John's Gospel has come down to us with ancient manuscripts equally divided between 'pisteuite' and 'pisteusite' (which is the difference between 'you may keep on believing' and 'you may come to believe'). One little letter's difference might transform, one way or another, when and how we use biblical texts in communicating our faith. Those errors didn't have the excuse of computer auto-correct, but it's a helpful image to think of the sleepy scribe late at night at his candle-lit desk in a monastic scriptorium unaware that he has slipped in an extra letter, or missed one out.

All this might sound very mechanical. But I had the pleasure of having both a full time proofreader and a full time translator among my congregation in my last place, and it was very clear to me that to call their roles mechanical would fail to do justice to the extent to which, in doing their work, they were probing meaning. A proofreader or translator is exactly the person to ask whether the writer meant the thing that they said, or whether they had properly set out their real priorities.

So let's give thanks for those with an eye for detail. Proofreading is not simply 'spotting what's wrong' – it's making clear what's written. And it allows the rest of us to focus on the important, and not become lost in corrections and clarifications.

(Fr) Paul.

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P.S. While we're at it, it's probably worth giving thanks for editors too: the ones who chivy people to deadlines, who have to make short articles look long, and who keep on doing so for umpteen years. Come to think of it, there's probably a call somewhere for a new set of Beatitudes that covers all these people – and includes printers too.

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November 2022

‘Growth’ is a word and an idea much in use at the moment.

A recently-resigned Prime Minister presented ‘growing the economy’ as the foundational principle of her premiership, and as the justification (unfounded, in the eyes of many, including the US President) for a whole suite of financial measures that served the interests of the already-wealthy far more than the desperate and urgent needs of not only the very poorest, but also millions of others who in domestic or business life have only just been staying afloat for years. ‘Growth’ became an almost hypnotic mantra, to be deployed in almost any answer (especially when you’re clear you have delivered), and those who criticized the ethical, philosophical, political, or economic principles underlying these measures were derided as an ‘anti-growth coalition’.

Thankfully, most of those proposed measures are no longer with us – but we continue to live in febrile times when snappy soundbites, including those with ‘growth’ in them, take far too much prominence in our national debate.

The Church, as an institution, is also increasingly prone to deploying ‘growth’ language. Those who have some control over purse-strings, whether the general distribution of National and Diocesan funds, or the special allocation of time-limited project funding, will repeatedly ask whether something is generating ‘numerical and spiritual growth’, questioning what initiatives are gaining traction, where green shoots are to be seen, and what’s going to make the quickest impact. Those communities where the church has to pedal furiously simply to stay in existence, to maintain cherished understandings of the gospel in the face of outside pressure, to serve the needs of the most vulnerable, or to maintain good community connections – not to mention those communities finding that expected funds are delayed by factors in the control of the funders - may not find such language at all helpful.

All this is built upon the assumption that ‘growth’ is a ‘good thing’, and of course it can be. But there are many areas of life where ‘growth’ is not the ideal. When tumours grow; when disease, rot or violence spreads; when invasive species take over, this is ‘growth’, but not something to be celebrated. When economic growth has been built upon human slavery, species exploitation, unsustainable consumption, or environmental degradation, such growth is morally bankrupt. We are beginning to realize – but can easily forget – that the resources of our world are finite: and the ‘growth’ demands that we make on these resources threaten not only the far future, but the very near future for many, and the present for some.

We even need to be careful about applying ‘growth’ to our personal lives. The myth fed to younger generations that we can all be what we want to be, and the pressure laid on younger generations to be constantly growing – developing talent, acquiring new skills, building connection, adding to the CV – generates vast quantities of anxiety. With that anxiety (healthy in very small doses of course) comes illness. What do we say when someone ceases to show signs of something we label as ‘growth’ – when the thing we have called ‘potential’ seems to be unfulfilled? How do we respond when activity that is a sign of human creativity and human flourishing seems to die away? Where do we go when, in older years, talents fall away, memory fails, dependency grows? It takes rather more than simple repetition of “Did you know that the Bible says ‘do not be afraid/anxious’ [365/X] times”.

The Bible says curiously little about growth. There are the familiar parables of growing the Kingdom in Matthew 13 / Mark 4, but Jesus is not forever speaking about growth. The Hebrew Scriptures are more concerned with natural growth, divine blessing, the just ordering of the nation and the good ordering of creation. And Saint Paul is strangely silent. He may spread a message, and he may want to gather resources for the impoverished Jerusalem church, but he’s never lecturing his hearers about ‘growth’ in any other senses that we now use the word. Try finding the word ‘growth’ in his lists of Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit.

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I'm not avoiding the obvious truths here. Communities – including churches – need to grow in various ways so that their communal life does not go into terminal decline. In my lifetime, we have seen such a decline in faith and in community in many places in the West. But an obsession with growth becomes a mark of desperation. Maturity, wisdom, understanding, good communication, authenticity, truth-seeking, respect: these are all qualities that make communities – including communities of faith, and national communities too – attractive to outsiders, and gatherings worth continuing to belong to when we reach adulthood, middle age, and old age.

So, rather than endlessly going on about growth, I would rather we concern ourselves with faith, hope and love; with justice, truth, and joy; with beauty, compassion, and generosity; and with integrity, selflessness, and honour. These things belong at the heart of our national life, and at the heart of our churches.

And when we struggle with what seems like a lack of growth in personal lives (however defined), it may help us to recognize that God holds the whole picture – that God sees each person as a totality across time. Where we see decline, God sees conclusion; where we sense that someone moves away from us, God continues to see all that has been done with us and for us. These things are the stuff of many of my funeral addresses, but they're the stuff of living with change and decay too. If God redeems in Christ, he redeems the whole of what we have been, not just the high-water mark.

But this article is growing like Topsy – and the Editor has given me constrained space. So I end here. May November be a time of maturity and understanding: and may there be opening of new doors, rather than the closing of old ones.

With my good wishes,

(Fr) Paul.

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December 2022-January 2023

The World needs Advent.

The comfortably complacent of the World need to know that not everything can be taken for granted, that the resources they think are always there do have their limits, and that the consequences of their consumption do come with judgement attached.

The suffering of the World need to know that pain is not endless, that disadvantage and discrimination are not the natural order of things, and that the Sustainer of all that is will not allow wanton cruelty to go without response.

The rich of the World need to know that their riches are far more illusory than most of us imagine, that riches rarely convey the joy that we expect, and that the possession of riches is something that comes with accounting responsibilities.

The poor of the World need to know that Love is on their side, that they are most certainly not forgotten, and that Love indeed is on its way.

The powerful need to know that injustice does not win, the damaged and near-destroyed need to know that restitution is possible, and the downcast need to know that hope is not simply wishful thinking, but rather the making real and present of the things that already underpin the World.

Yes, the World does need Advent.

But the World seems to want to push it aside. Why wait, when you can have what you want right now? Why abstain, when the thing you desire is in front of you? Why talk of death, when 'passing' will do?

We are all creatures of the World, and our approach to faith is never easy – for any of us – to detach from that creatureliness. Indeed, it would be wrong to try to detach ourselves from our created, physical selves: that would be a denial of all that God made good in creation, and a descent into the wholly misleading idea that the business of life is to separate the spiritual from the physical, and seek only the spiritual.

Advent has long been the season when the World most readily connects with Christian faith. But the World only usually attaches 'Advent' to the coming of a baby – a particular baby, yes, a world changing baby, certainly – and misses both that the arrival of babies stirs up all kinds of hopes and fears for the future, and that the Advent we all need deals with grown-up things too. The World may manage, by the time it reaches Christmas Eve, to call out resoundingly 'O hush the noise, ye men of strife, and hear the angels sing!' But it pays less attention, through the holly and the mistletoe, the mince pies and the wine, the cards and the wrapping paper, to all the things that God intends to transform by taking human flesh and coming among us.

The World is at times a dark place. It does need light. Some of that light comes through hospitality and good cheer, certainly. Some of it comes through the warmth of happy company, and joyful song. And, we might add, light needs to be carbon-neutral too. But light also comes through passionate commitment to a new world order - a world turned upside down; and that's often not so comfortable. When we sing of tidings of comfort and joy, we need to remind ourselves (as we more often do round Pentecost) that 'comfort' can be as much a prod to do what's right, as a soothing blanket and soft slippers.

So, yes, Christmas is coming. But the totality of God's coming (which is the 'Advent' that the world needs) is much more than midwinter cheer; and the joy which follows is something that is not just for the duration of the overpriced turkey leftovers and the wilting Christmas greenery. The joy rests in a Jesus

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who is not simply born vulnerable and away from home, but who challenges us day by day, and who is the one who is crucified, risen, ascended and glorified.

We are an Advent people, and 'Come, Lord Jesus; Come Emmanuel; Come God-with-us' is our song: may that song never be drowned out by the revelry and may the hope it contains never be lost by the distractions of this time.

(Fr) Paul.

P.S. This article would not be complete without a word of thanks to Ann for all that she has done as editor of this magazine in two spells across much of the last two decades. She will no doubt be writing farewells elsewhere in this edition, but let it not go unremarked here that her multi-faceted contribution to the life of the church in St Neots over very nearly twenty years will be missed by many people. We will have a chance to say our thanks on the morning of Saturday 7th January (service at 11 at SNPC, lunch to follow): I do hope that many will take the opportunity to be there.