

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2023 (to July)

### 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 last 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 mid 2023, they are still there. And we continue to see considerable turmoil in the life of our government.

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  
July 2023

### 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 2023 - All change!

The moment has arrived. Welcome, Izzy, to your new role as magazine editor, and thank you for taking on this ambitious project. Who knows what new directions will emerge in the coming months?

January has been an odd sort of month. We said farewell first to Ann (hoping that her move to Ely will be as smooth as it can be) and then to Geoff and Rhona Matthews, wishing them well for their move to Lincolnshire. We've heard of multiple illnesses and injuries – and particularly find ourselves adapting to having an organist whose right arm is in plaster. And we've also watched from afar as the Roman Catholic Church laid Pope Benedict XVI to rest.

But then we also noticed that the national Church of England has been absorbed once again in controversy surrounding the two issues that so often divide it: the ministry of women (and the position of those who do not fully accept it); and the church's formal positions on Gender, Sexuality and Marriage. On the latter, things are moving very quickly, and everything may look rather different again by the time this article is published, so... no more on that here.

John Henry Newman (beatified by Benedict XVI, canonized by Francis) is credited as saying 'to live is to change: to be perfect is to have changed often' (it's in his *Essay on Christian Doctrine*, 1845). But the Church can still be very nervous about change, and at its most cautious moments it seems to embody the old hymn 'In heavenly love abiding', as it continues 'no change my heart shall fear; and safe is such confiding, for nothing changes here'.

But things do change, and we all change. If we sometimes think we are not the people we once were, we need also to remind ourselves that we are also more than we once were: the store of memory and the depth of experience has increased over time, and if our powers (or our numbers) seem diminished, there is a totality which does not cease to grow. The challenge of maturity is the challenge of integrating what has gone before with how things are now, so that we – as individuals and community – display more fully the qualities that make for rich human life.

In the end, all is in God's hands, of course. But on the way, the stuff of what makes us, the pattern of who we are, is shaped by the choices that we make for good or ill. We may have an inbuilt tendency to choose the wrong things (as St Paul observed in Romans 7, as St Augustine turned into the idea of original sin, and as the Ely-based author Francis Spufford has turned into a rather more colourful expression – see his 'Unapologetic' for more) and we may pile up moments we regret, but there is both the possibility of forgiveness for that, and the ever-renewing work of the Spirit that leads us towards love, joy peace, patience, kindness and the rest.

In the politics of the current Church of England, the concept of 'change' is sometimes used as a cover for rather more prosaic re-organisation. Most of us can, I hope, spot when the word is being used in this way. But sometimes even prosaic organisational things need to change: if they hadn't and didn't, I would still be demanding tithes from local landowners, and we would still be worshipping in Latin or even Greek (Oh, yes please, I hear you cry...).

So let's do our best to celebrate the changes that come upon us this year, both the expected ones and the unanticipated ones. The freshness and delights of new friendships (there are plenty of those to be made in our church communities at the moment, as well as in the rapidly developing and changing life of our town), new patterns of life, and new ways of understanding faith can be transformative, if we let them, and they can work for good in even the most improbable circumstances.

(Fr) Paul

P.S. I would love to be writing here about what might be coming up in the programme for Lent, but I'm not yet able to do so. I'd like to hope that we have a range of additional worship and opportunities to meet, study and reflect. But the busyness of these first weeks of the year means that there is not yet a clear direction settled for the coming season. More will emerge – but in the meantime, enjoy a month which doesn't have pancakes until the 21<sup>st</sup>, and should, day by day, become brighter and lighter!

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2023 (to July)

March 2023 - On Marriage

I don't remember when I first consciously took what would now be called an 'inclusive' or 'liberal' view on human relationships. It was after my early-teenage evangelicalism, but before a momentous General Synod debate in November 1987 when an Essex Vicar called Tony Higton proposed a motion condemning same-sex relationships (the motion was passed in a much-modified form after the intervention of the then Bishop of Chester - not a liberal - Michael Baughen). I remember the time acutely: my walk to church in my Law College year at Chester passed the pavement doors of two Evangelical churches - one Anglican, the other Paisleyite Presbyterian. The former often had people leafleting on the street, the latter had a Pastor who frequently wrote condemnatory letters in the press, and was also not noted for his kindness to Roman Catholics (whose church was straight across the street).

Since that time, while not a campaigner, I have always found myself very naturally on the inclusive side of the official line. We are a church that attends to the Bible, to tradition, and to reason: the Bible speaks with many voices (even the apparently straightforward texts aren't really so), tradition is far from monolithic, and reason makes us pay attention not only to issues like justice and equality, and to how the Bible's texts have very different 'registers' and histories, but also to the experience of those who have lived with discrimination, oppression, and outright hatred. So - as someone whose conduct wasn't itself challenged by the 1991 document 'Issues in Human Sexuality' (the House of Bishop's statements on standards in this area, which ordinands and clergy have been expected to assent to for the last thirty years) - I have found myself always questioning its strange maintenance of a different standard for laity and for clergy in the matter of same-sex relationships. I am much relieved that it is at last to be scrapped (and apologies have been made), just as I have always been relieved not to work in a role that requires me to enforce its provisions.

It's nearly two decades since the introduction of Civil Partnerships in the various parts of the UK. It seemed right to me then that these should be created, and I have again found myself questioning the strange strictures that the Church has placed upon clergy and lay ministers in Civil Partnerships, and particularly upon clergy in same-sex marriages once they were introduced in 2014. Below the radar, it's been well-known that some dioceses and bishops are more welcoming than others of clergy in same-sex relationships.

When the same-sex marriage proposals were being discussed in 2013, I initially wondered why Civil Partnership were not enough. But then I noticed that people who had been vehemently against them a decade before were now saying the same, and I was challenged by others on why Marriage (which is sometimes described in terms of its goods, including the conceiving and raising of children) could be open to those of opposite sex who - for a variety of reasons - had no prospect of conceiving children themselves, but denied to those of the same sex in the same position.

It was around this time that I also came to appreciate that the relationship of the Church to the celebration of marriage has been a complex one: it's not 2000 years of a single story, but a complex mess of different attitudes (including very little direct involvement in the first thousand years), which have also played out in the shifting views that the Church has had about Divorce, and Remarriage after Divorce (much discussed especially in my teenage years, and then again in my curacy years). It has seemed to me over the last ten years that the Church is sometimes trying to claim an authority over who can and can't marry that was never the Church's to claim until the political machinations of the high-medieval papacy. It has also started making distinctions between so-called 'Holy Matrimony' and civil marriage which are far from helpful, reintroducing notions of two classes of marriage that should long ago have been consigned to history.

As I write this, it feels like an essay that needs many long footnotes, and needs to miss out comments on a wide variety of other questions, like celibacy and pre-marital relations. Space forces me to condense, in ways that probably distort the detail of what I am saying. It also pushes me very rapidly towards a conclusion that had to skip over various reports and conversations along the way, and any overarching comment about the diversity of opinion in the Anglican Communion. But I think I do need to write this now.

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So, I welcome the proposals of the House of Bishops to write new inclusive pastoral guidance, and to provide prayers that may bless couples. I hope to be able to use the final versions of the prayers in due course when permitted. I wish the Church could complete the journey and agree to marry same-sex couples - but I can see that the balance of power in General Synod (whose membership is partly coloured by very effective campaigning by conservative Christians on this very question) would prevent the necessary two-thirds majorities being obtained in all three Synod houses.

We belong to a Church that has seen many changes of policy on many matters over the centuries. The question of the marriage of same-sex couples is but the latest - and it folds in (as so many have before) fundamental questions about how we read the Bible, and how we understand the many layered history of how Christians globally have made decisions in the twenty centuries of the Church's life. I would like to hope that before I reach retirement, the Church of England has reached the point where marriages between two people of the same sex can be solemnised in an Anglican Church (as they can be in Scotland, Wales, Canada, USA, New Zealand and some other places). But let's see first what the House of Bishops draws up by way of pastoral guidance and finalised prayers...

(Fr) Paul.

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April 2023 - A word in season...

The Church asks a lot of its members in Holy Week. We are all asked to engage - passionately and imaginatively - with a sequence of events that come crashing in upon each other with hardly a moment for breath. Each of those events calls us to the consideration of polar opposites; loyalty and betrayal; adulation and contempt; love and hatred; justice and expediency; freedom and oppression; commitment and flight; affirmation and denial; sin and forgiveness; tradition and innovation; death and resurrection. In any other walk of life, we would think that all this – bundled into a very short sequence of observances – was just too much to handle. If someone came to us and said that their week had had them dealing with all these things, we'd be inviting them to take an armchair and – in spirit at least – putting the kettle on.

But in Holy Week, we're asked to take all these things in, and invited to allow ourselves to be transformed by our engagement with them.

So we ask ourselves - How would we have felt here? What would we have done there? When would we have intervened to change things? Might we have shown more courage, more joy, more trust, more intense devotion, more intelligence in the face of the ways of the world?

For many of us, exposing ourselves annually to this cycle of events takes its toll – the toll of familiarity. We develop strategies to cope with this familiarity – maybe expecting some novelty; maybe rationing ourselves to more selective engagement with differing parts of the story each year; maybe demanding that everything is in an exactly predictable sequence, so we can allow ourselves the space to go off on our own mental tangents, knowing that the normal things will be there as soon as we come back to them.

There are other strategies, of course: for some of us, we have taken the story in bite-sized chunks; or we dip in here and there; for others, the only bit of the story that matters is the last chapter, so we can jump straight there; for others again, thanks to years of particular theological emphasis in the church we attend, all that matters is the death.

For most of us, Holy Week never happens in a vacuum. There are always things going on around us that can wear us down or lift us up. Family news, time spent with friends, tragedy in the world around us, the beauties of spring. It's inevitable that some of us just won't want the wringing emotion of a blow-by-blow engagement with events in Jerusalem.

Historically, the Church has taken some very different approaches to keeping this week.

There have been times and places where the whole drama is packed into one overnight observance from Saturday night into Sunday morning, where everything I have talked about is compressed into one mammoth gathering.

At other times and places, the one marathon that matters is an act of worship on the day of the Lord's death (it was just such a marathon that gave birth to the German Lutheran tradition of setting the Passion story to elaborate music with a long sermon in the middle, the tradition of which Bach's two surviving Passions are the supreme culmination).

At other times and places, a wide variety of acts of worship have been devised to echo the journeys made by pilgrims when they visit Jerusalem – our current church calendar is mostly influenced by such an approach, as are such individual devotions as the Stations of the Cross, or the Seven Last Words.

But for many of us, the trials of the world push us away from too heavy an engagement with the story, from too many hours with the script. Perhaps we will escape being made to feel guilty for having attended to our wellbeing. Or perhaps we will have an inner voice telling us we should be more devotional, more committed, more prepared to surrender ourselves to whatever the Spirit will reveal to us this year. Perhaps both will be in constant dialogue with each other...

Wherever you find yourself, physically or emotionally, this Holy Week, I hope you are able to discover something that surprises, something that delights, and something that moves you in ways you hadn't expected. In all the barrage of emotions that Holy Week puts us through, there can be an inner drive to step away from too much pain, or even to take the whole week at arm's length.

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The pattern that's laid out this year does include some variations on normal observances. The evening service on Palm Sunday is about what leads to the Passion, not the Passion itself. The Act of Witness in the Market Square on Good Friday places us in the hands of Christians of a variety of traditions other than our own. But whether you seek out the familiar, or work with the new, I hope that you can arrive at Easter Day ready to feel the refreshment of the new/old message of the resurrection hope. In Jesus' name...

(Fr) Paul.

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May 2023 - 'Crown the King!'

In the middle of my collection of LPs (yes, I'm old enough to have acquired a lot of vinyl before it went out of fashion) I have an LP published in 1977 that I bought some years later, after I was introduced to it by one of the singers in the chorus – the current Dean of Ely, no less. If you look at the chorus photo (in massed forces in King's College Chapel) and know what you're looking for, you can just about work out where student Mark is, too!

The LP is a recording of the Coronation Ode which Elgar was commissioned to write for a gala concert on the eve of the 1902 Coronation of King Edward VII. That was meant to be in June, but the King was having his appendix removed (!) so the Coronation was postponed to August, and the concert to October.

These days, the Ode is chiefly remembered as the piece where, for the finale, Elgar took a tune he'd written the previous year (Pomp & Circumstance March No 1), which he knew that King Edward already loved, and added to it words by Arthur Benson that begin 'Land of hope and glory'. It's not quite the version of the words now sung at the Last Night of the Proms every year, for it ends

Hark, a mighty nation maketh glad reply;  
Lo, our hearts are thankful, Lo, our hearts are high!  
Hearts in hope uplifted, loyal lips that sing;  
Strong in faith and freedom, we have crowned our King.

But there are seven movements that come before: one added for Queen Mary in 1910 ('True Queen of British homes and hearts') to replace the one written for Queen Alexandra ('Daughter of ancient kings') in 1902. After a grand and stirring opening chorus that begins

Crown the King with Life! // Through our thankful state  
Let the cries of hate // Die in joy away,  
Cease ye, sounds of strife, // Lord of Life we pray, // Crown the King with Life!

(sentiments that might not be altogether out of place in our fractured state and world today), the poem continues to ask that he be crowned with Might, Peace, Love, and Faith.

In the movements that follow the first, some of it is tub-thumping Imperial bombast (including military conquest and the griefs of the Boer War), some of it clearly breathes the playing fields of Eton (where Arthur Benson was a housemaster at the time of writing), and some of it is a Serenade to Music in words that echo Shakespeare's best in plays like *A Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*.

I'm not sure that I would want a poet writing for the events that will unfold before us in the next weeks to write in such terms today. However grand the ceremonial on and around 6<sup>th</sup> May, our country and our world are vastly changed since 1953 (let alone since 1902/10). On the other hand, while Elgar's music (putting aside *Pomp & Circumstance*) is not some of his finest, it has many stirring moments, and has the capacity to move hearts. Perhaps that's what we need to hear from our contemporary composers and poets in coming days.

Wouldn't it be good to have something to tell generations to come that will inspire them, and something to keep on singing and playing, in the way that 1953 has given such a rich legacy to imaginations and to performers in most of our lifetimes? We may not yet know what that defining moment or idea might be (it certainly won't be the neighbour's new television set, and I have my doubts about Quiche) but perhaps we shall see or hear things that change our perspective, and renew our inspiration to do good in the world. And perhaps, through that, as Benson put it

God shall save the King. // God shall make him great, // God shall guard the state;  
All that hearts can pray, // All that lips can sing, // God shall hear today;  
Crown the King with Life, with Might, // With Peace, with Love, with Faith!

Enjoy these days: they may never come quite the same again.

(Fr) Paul.

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June 2023 - 'Come, Holy Spirit!'

Pentecost is upon us. The fifty days since Passover/Pascha/Easter have passed, our Alleluias have had their special time, the Paschal Candle is about to move to the Font, and someone mentions the Birthday of the Church. The Elamites make their annual appearance, and we try to remember that Cappadocia is not a frothy milky Turkish coffee.

It's a great festival of the Church. You may even be reading this article on Whitsun Weekend (not that anyone outside the church – save perhaps in Lancashire – calls it that any more), and have a particular celebratory gathering that you are planning for the holiday.

The miraculous gathering in the Jerusalem market-place is a notable event in history, and calendar-based Christians are good at celebrating great historical events. Our whole year is built around the accumulated memory of first century events, and the notable Christians who have followed in the 2000 years since.

But this can cause us to miss why Pentecost is so important to us. With Christmas and Easter, we talk about Christ being born in our hearts today, about entering into Christ's sufferings, and in sharing the resurrection joy. But with Pentecost, we tend to be more firmly set in 'looking back' mode.

This isn't a problem for all Christians, of course. Those hundreds of millions around the globe whose experience of faith is of a 'Charismatic' or 'Pentecostal' tradition (the two are not identical, but this is not the place to tease that out) expect the Holy Spirit to be visibly and actively present in worship and in community life at all times. Famous revivals are almost always built upon the experience of the Spirit – from Saint Paul's communities, though early centuries, medieval mystics, Baptists and Quakers, the Wesleys and other eighteenth century Evangelicals, turn of the twentieth century movements in America seen also over here in – for example – South Wales and Sunderland, to the modern charismatic movements across the globe in our lifetimes. It's expected that the Spirit will be felt within and seen in healing and transformation of lives.

But for those of us whose Christian life is more ordered by calendar and formal liturgy (not necessarily eucharistic – the same would be true of those word-based traditions of Lutheran and Reformed origin, for instance), the danger is that we have a jolly time on the Fiftieth Day (for 'Fiftieth' is what 'Pentecost' means – no more), and then put the Spirit back in the box for another year.

In part of most of our lifetimes, the Church tried to work against this tendency by designating a whole season as the season of Pentecost, and by rolling out a set of themes that took us through how the Spirit works in our lives. The Alternative Service Book picked up themes devised ecumenically in the 1970s, and for 20 years we worked through them each year.

But it's now nearly a quarter century since we approached our calendar in this way, and the familiar passages of the New Testament – both in Acts and in Paul's letters – that talk of the Spirit's work come round much less often.

So, as we move into June and Pentecost drifts into memory for another year, let's try and keep on remembering those places in the New Testament (and the Old) where the Spirit's work is spelt out for all Christians – and not just the 'enthusiastic' types:

- The Fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5): love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control;
- The Gifts of the Spirit (1 Cor 12): wisdom, knowledge, faith, healing, miracles, prophecy, discernment, tongues and their interpretation, other such things;
- The callings of the Spirit (1 Cor 12); apostles, prophets, teachers, healers, assistance, leadership;
- Gifts that differ (Rom 12): prophecy, ministry, teaching, exhortation, generous giving, diligent leadership, compassionate cheerfulness
- The Spirit that speaks in our weakness (Rom 8), and prays within us;
- The Spirit as Advocate, Consoler, and Comforter; the Spirit that breathes forgiveness, and the power to forgive (John's Gospel);



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- The Spirit of the root of Jesse (Isaiah 11): wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord;
- The Spirit of Isaiah 61 and Luke 4, bringing good news to the oppressed, binding up the broken-hearted, proclaiming liberty to captives and the year of the Lord's favour (and more still...); and
- The Spirit that hovers over the face of the waters (Gen 1) and gives life (Ezekiel 34 & 37).

May we all know something of the Spirit's work in our lives, and may it be seen, too, in the quality of our life together.

(Fr) Paul.

First additional article for June 2023 - 673 and all that...

673AD was a busy time in the story of Anglo-Saxon Christianity. Ten years on from the ground-changing decision at the Synod of Whitby to follow the rules of the Roman Church, a wave of new church-building in the Roman (Benedictine) style was beginning. In 672, the politically-minded Bishop Wilfrid founded his new church at Ripon – the crypt of that church can still be visited. In 674, the cultured and learned Benedict Biscop founded the first half of his new monastic community at Wearmouth (the north bank of the river in what is now Sunderland) - the lower part of whose church tower can also still be seen. Both were to found a second church community – Wilfrid at Hexham in 674 (that crypt is also still there), Biscop at Jarrow (where the Chancel still survives) in 681. Hexham became the seat of a bishop for a time; Jarrow the home of the Venerable Bede.

And, in 673, Etheldreda...

But let's wind the clock back a few years. Etheldreda (sometimes called Aethelthryth) was the second of four daughters of a Christian King of East Anglia, confusingly called King Anna. Etheldreda's mother Hereswith was well-connected too: a sister of Abbess Hilda of Whitby, both were great-nieces of the great Northumbrian King Edwin.

King Anna looked to ensure his daughters were well provided for: one married a Christian King of Kent, one went to a notable monastery in France; the youngest chose a humbler path. Etheldreda, the second, was married young to an East Anglian nobleman called Tondberht. It would seem that even then she felt a vocation to the celibate life. But the marriage to Tondberht provided her with a gift of land – the Isle of Ely; and when he died young, that land remained hers.

Her father Anna was one of the Christian Anglo-Saxon kings to die at the hands of Penda, the pagan King of Mercia. The next East Anglian king, her uncle, decided that she should be given in marriage to the heir to the Northumbrian throne, Ecgrith – but an unusual contract was arranged where Etheldreda would continue to live celibate.

A decade after they were married, Ecgrith succeeded his father Oswy to the Northumbrian throne in 670. Wilfrid had already been spiritual adviser to both Ecgrith and Etheldreda, but once he was king, Ecgrith's relations with his still-celibate wife became deeply strained, and Wilfrid's standing with him suffered as he took Etheldreda's side. Eventually, on Wilfrid's advice, Etheldreda decided to enter the religious life and divorce the king. Giving some land at Hexham to Wilfrid (the land on which he founded his church), she went to the mixed community governed by another royal Northumbrian woman, Ebba, at Coldingham (a few miles north of modern Berwick).

She was with Ebba under a year, but it was a fruitful time for her faith. Ecgrith, however, continued to be very sore at her decision and attempted to come and seize her back: she fled, and eventually decided to return by land to the place that remained rightly hers – the Isle of Ely. There she created a new religious community that – like Coldingham and Whitby – was a mixed community of women and men. Wilfrid went to her and consecrated her as Abbess, and over the years that followed, she was joined by others, including her older sister Seaxburh (often called Sexburga). It was an austere life – one meal a day, rough garments, penance and prayer, devotional watches in the small hours of the night.

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Like Hilda's, at a very similar time, Etheldreda's last years were blighted by an illness. She developed tumours in the neck (a plague of some sort, perhaps?), and – perhaps rather quaintly – attributed them to the jewels that used to adorn her in her days as Princess and Queen. She had a painful end, but met it with grace on 23<sup>rd</sup> June 679. Her sister succeeded her as Abbess, followed in later years by her niece and then great-niece Eormenhild (Ermengild) and Waerburh (Werbunga).

Seventeen years later, her body was found to be incorrupt, with wounds cured. Wilfrid and her former physician were among those who witnessed it. So a stone coffin was brought by river from the old roman fort on the north bank of the Cam at Cambridge, and she was laid to rest again in a shrine at Ely. And thus it was that a community flourished there for almost 200 years before the great sacking of eastern England by the Danes in the 860s.

On 24<sup>th</sup> June, the Diocese gives thanks for 1350 years since the Ely community was founded. Many of us will be there. Thanks be to God!

(Fr) Paul.

### Second additional article for June 2023 - Another Ordination Anniversary?

There are times when A and I find it very hard to believe that this June it will be 25 years since we stood next to each other, waiting to be ordained priest, on the north side of the central crossing in Durham Cathedral, with a line of prospective deacons (as was still normal then) facing us on the opposite, south, side.

We weren't the first clergy couple to be priested together at Durham – that honour belonged the previous year to Judith and Stephen (a couple with Cumbrian roots who later moved to Australia). Judith continued to use her maiden name, however, so it was less obvious.

It was a small cohort, for Durham. We were two of only five, although there were also two non-stipendiaries, Margaret and Trish, ordained at Michaelmas (as was also more normal then). Of the other three, two are still in the northeast: Stuart (who had trained with us at Cuddesdon) has been at both Wearmouth and Jarrow, as well as having a spell in the same York Diocese archdeaconry as Stokesley; while Dick has ministered in three different settings in the City of Sunderland. The third, Jeremy, has recently moved to villages on the Welsh side of the border near Wrexham, after some years as Precentor of Chester, and time before that in the Midlands and South.

The management of the ordination and retreat was in the capable hands of three people who were only months into their responsibilities. Michael, the junior precentor (currently, after working in several cathedrals, the acting Dean of Durham), had watched the rehearsal the previous year, and knew how essential it was to keep the Senior Canons out of the way! Nick, the Director of Post-Ordination Training (currently Bishop of Grantham), had already taken strides to get to know us all well. Stephen, the new Bishop's Chaplain (now – where has he got to?), also knew most of us well, and indeed preached at Stuart's first eucharist.

Both our Training Incumbents were there, of course (as were those of the other three). A's is still in the same post, not yet retired; mine sadly died of cancer a year younger than I am now. We invited a couple of other clergy to be present, along with members of our families, and we had parishioners present to wish us well. In a Diocese where over 95% of the population live less than 20 miles from the cathedral, and many roads do lead to Durham, parishioners always have a strong sense of belonging there. We were very struck by the number of people present, cheering us on.

Some aspects of the service itself are, of course, a bit of a blur, though some emotional moments have lodged deep, as has the time on retreat in the days before (only a few miles from our then home) in the wilds of Northumberland, south of Hexham. The Bishop who ordained us – Michael Turnbull – was a wise and thoughtful man who deserves to be remembered in his retirement for much more than just the early 1990s bureaucratic reorganization of the Church of England that bears his name. His suffragan, Alan Smithson, Bishop of Jarrow, was more eccentric, but also very kind.

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The week that followed brought the round of five very different first eucharists. A was first, that evening; Stuart, the following evening: both celebrating St Peter's Day. Jeremy's (with a cast of thousands, it seemed) was on the Tuesday evening. Dick – being rather less eucharistic – did a quiet midweek celebration. Finally, I took St Thomas' Day on the Friday evening – an opportunity for a range of old friends to gather (and sing a lot), and an important feast in my team ministry parish, which had closed a crumbling pit-village barn of a Victorian building dedicated to St Thomas three months before I had arrived there.

And since then? A and I have never been (or wanted to be) a ministry double-act. We've both had substantial experience of market town and small rural settings, as well as 'city', and both had double experience of sector chaplaincy. We've been part of the wider community of four dioceses, with multiple connections across a couple of neighbouring ones. In acting as unpaid assistant in multi-parish benefices, A has managed more than once to have the longest entry on the Church Times appointments page. Meanwhile, for the first dozen years, I watched the average age of ordination rise in line with my age. There has, of course, been the little matter of becoming parents along the way...

Neither of us wants to make a great occasion of this anniversary. We might decide to mark it in a small way, though we certainly have no grand plans. But it would, I think, be wrong to leave it completely unremarked-upon, or indeed to omit mention of some of the friends who have been part of the journey. Thank you, St Neots and Eynesbury, for being the latest stage.

(Fr) Paul.

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2023 (to July)

July 2023 - A tribute to Bishop Stephen

In last month's magazine, as I reminisced about my priesting 25 years ago, I wrote: "Stephen, the new Bishop's Chaplain (now – where has he got to?), also knew most of us well..."

Little did I know that, between writing and publication, the answer to my question would change. Downing Street announced his appointment as the next Bishop of Lincoln on the Wednesday before Pentecost, and the timetable will mean that he has completed his farewells by mid-July, and officially become Bishop of Lincoln (after the 'Confirmation of Election') before the end of the month. Some time in the early autumn, there will be the formal inauguration of ministry in Lincoln Cathedral (supervised by an Acting Dean who knows him well), and the transfer will be complete.

As many are aware, Bishop Stephen and I have known each other for a long time. We didn't meet in Cambridge in the years he was a Westcott House ordinand and I was a churchgoing law student at Trinity Hall (though I suspect we may at some time have been in the same building), but we did meet at church gatherings on Tyneside in the later 1980s (including occasions when I was the organist), and my acquaintance with him became rather more direct when, after his curacy, he took up the role of Diocesan Director of Ordinands in 1990 (living initially in a Sunderland parish and street where I later served, and then not far from me in Durham City). His work has continued to move on in four-year steps: Vicar of a large Darlington parish; Bishop of Durham's Chaplain; Archdeacon of Durham; Bishop of Ramsbury (in Salisbury Diocese). He's been here in Ely Diocese for thirteen years – a decent spell as a Diocesan Bishop.

The Diocese owes much of its current character to Stephen's leadership: not only his appointments but also the ways in which he has formed diocesan policies and seeded Diocesan initiatives. When thinking of coming to St Neots, I read the various things he wrote early in his time here, and realized they came from a much more thoughtful leader than many Dioceses have. 'Imagining the Future', 'Naming our Hopes' and 'Ely 2025' are much less prone to falling into current jargon than equivalent documents in other places. And whilst we may have our misgivings about how the 'Changing Market Towns' project has unfolded, it emerged from a conviction that Ely Diocese – and especially the Fens – needed central church funds to be used in appropriately tailored ways. Most Dioceses have been following stereotypical paths – we have not been.

Much of the strength of Stephen's leadership comes from the way in which he values personal relationships and has huge reserves of time and concern for almost everyone he deals with. We've seen how he has so plunged into a ministry of love and care that it has taken its toll: and the time he's needed away from ministry has shown that even the best of us can stretch ourselves to breaking point. The honesty of his writing about that experience has been a great example: we are all in need of grace, and none of us (ordained or lay) can bear the weight of our calling in our own strength.

Before coming here, I was able to see some of Stephen's work through my time on General Synod, the world of education, friendship with some of his team, and continuing membership of the Ecclesiastical Law Society (of which he has been President). If there is any truth in the cruel allegation that the Church of England has a substantial number of episcopal clones (and I think that allegation is very wide of the mark), Stephen is most certainly not one of them. His character and insight are remarkable: he can be clear about his own faith and guiding principles, while creating space for people of very different backgrounds and perspectives. In a diocese where views on some issues have been diametrically opposed (I've seen that at Diocesan Synod), Stephen has managed to steer a course which keeps different views in conversation, and enables friendships to continue across what might otherwise be rigidly drawn party lines.

Bishop Stephen has a different challenge ahead of him in the very different circumstances of Lincoln. But with the sixteen months he has already served that Diocese, he is going with his eyes open. He believes fervently in his calling to be there: and from all I have known of him, it seems very right that he should take Lincoln on.

Many will miss him. But in time he will have a successor, and we know we have a good caretaker in Bishop Dagmar. I wish Bishop Stephen well for the next five years. May his ministry continue to flourish.

(Fr) Paul.

## **The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2023 (to July)**

### **Additional article for July 2023 - They Came, They Sang, They Conquered**

*Fr Paul reports on two musical events that made creative use of the resources available at SNPC, four days apart in the summer heat of mid June.*

### **Royal School of Church Music - Music Sunday, 11<sup>th</sup> June (St Barnabas' Day)**

We hadn't planned to do Choral Evensong with visiting choirs on this day \*because\* it was Music Sunday – but it was very appropriate that we did. St Neots choir were joined by local friends, and choir members also came from Gransdens, Godmanchester, Kimbolton, and Ashwell. The RSCM Ely Area Chair, Canon James Reveley (Ely Cathedral), was also with us.

It can be tricky to bring together a disparate group of singers in one rehearsal but, at the front of the Nave in college chapel formation, we were in the expert hands of Ralph Woodward (one of Cambridge's best choral directors). Some wore the robes of the choir they came from – others were in black, or gowned. Some were able music readers and others had prepared well – and the benefits showed immediately. Lloyd and I found ourselves stepping down from our usual voice to the bass line (the least staffed of the four parts) in the unaccompanied anthem; but even if the distance from the main organ was a challenge, the acoustic space was clearly the best one to use.

The music was a mix of the familiar and the new: Ayleward responses are much loved, Bairstow's 'Let all mortal flesh keep silence' was once sung by our choir during a BBC broadcast of Songs of Praise (and is widely liked), and the hymns and psalms were well known; on the other hand, the fairly straightforward setting of the Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis, by Grayston Ives, was new to almost everyone. But the mixture worked well, and both choir and congregation enjoyed the service and were glad to come. I even managed to find some connection between St Barnabas, and the qualities needed to be a patron saint of music. You can find the link to the service on our Facebook page: we will do another one some day!

### **'Cantores Minores' from Helsinki Cathedral, Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> June**

The sixty strong choir of boys and young men from Helsinki, conducted by Hannu Norjanen – and accompanied by a TV crew preparing a documentary on their trip - came to us to renew an old link (created back in the 1990s, but lost perhaps 15 years ago), having not been able to secure a prestigious venue in Cambridge on a tour of Ireland, Scotland and London. They were superb!

Looking through the photos of their tour, we provided them with the largest concert audience by some margin (though they also sang in a major Mass in Dublin, where they were the first Lutheran choir ever to do so). We also provided them with a welcome meal (in two courses with a concert in between) at the end of a hot day – with many thanks to Isaac-Way catering plc and additional voluntary staff! I think they really appreciated all of it. Thank you also to those who made donations to cover costs, and to those who provided audience refreshments and cake too.

The music was wide-ranging, sung in Latin, German, French and Finnish – all of it introduced in English by one of the younger choristers. There were familiar pieces from the Western choral repertoire (Schütz's 'Verleih uns Frieden'; Bruckner's 'Ave Maria'; Fauré's 'Cantique de Jean Racine'; Bach's virtuosic 'Singet dem Herrn ein neues Lied'), some accompanied on the small organ; a piece by Buxtehude and an improvisation by the organist, Olli Saari, on the main organ; a less familiar German setting of the Lord's Prayer with a superb chorister solo; and, in Finnish, pieces by Toivo Kuula, Einojuhani Rautavaara, and a most atmospheric and moving 'Song of Maritime Calamity', written in the wake of the 1994 Estonia ferry disaster by Jaakko Mäntyjärvi. After warm words, the passionately sung Finlandia hymn (by Sibelius, of course) moved many hearts, and Joseph Rheinberger's lovely 'Abendlied' closed the evening.

An extraordinary evening: it would be such a delight to welcome them again.