

## The Rector Writes – Articles from The Messenger 2023-4 (From September 2023)

### 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.

In the autumn of 2023, we said farewell to a committed (but short term) editor. Magazines have become less frequent and – at the time of writing – the future of The Messenger is not certain. But here are the articles that I wrote in the Autumn and Winter of 2023-4.

I continue to make no claims to great profundity or wit in these articles. A small number of spelling and typographical mistakes are uncorrected

Paul Hutchinson  
May 2024

### 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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September – October 2023 - ‘How shall they hear’?

This is, I am afraid, a different kind of ‘front page’ article.

I need to begin with a particular word of thanks to Izzy Doran. At the close of last year, she agreed to take on the role of editor when Ann Williams moved to her new role in Ely. We always knew that Izzy’s tenure would depend on the direction of her own life in 2023: and she is laying her tenure down with this September-October edition so that she can pursue promising new paths. I’m sure we all wish her well.

Izzy, of course, has discovered the joys and sorrows of editing a parish magazine over the last nine months. There’s the work of pains-taking detail to make sure that the ‘reference’ elements are right: sometimes it’s difficult to get the right information in time for deadlines, and sometimes some things that we all think we know just haven’t got to the editor in the right way. There’s the chasing of regular contributors for their articles (guilty, m’lud); and there are careful judgements to make about how to create a balance of news and comment. Izzy has committed a lot of time to this: thank you so much, Izzy.

But now the magazine has reached a watershed. Will it be able to continue as one of the primary channels of parish communication?

Parish magazines have been a slowly shrinking force in the life of many churches over the last generation. In ever-expanding rural multi-parish groupings, a single magazine has often replaced multiple editions to become a tool to build group identity. In slightly larger communities, the magazine has often become a vehicle for a lot of non-church information sharing, a creator of village identity, perhaps. Sometimes in small towns (and, frankly, very unproductively) the magazine has been shared between churches of different denominations: this often makes it impossible to include denomination-specific issues or Diocesan information. Magazines can also sometimes become the place in which wider power struggles are played out through issues of editorial control, the range of permitted opinions, and the right of reply.

Surrounding all this, electronic communications have become dominant for a substantial majority of churchgoers. Whilst there are still some people for whom paper communication and word of mouth are the only ways in which they receive information, those people might be surprised to discover that for others, papers of any kind (whether home-made or newspapers and magazines) are never something that they consult. Even if younger church members do consult such papers, they may not read much of the written content – treating the magazine simply as a ready reference tool. When I write articles, I know that a fair few church members will probably not read them.

In the last decade, much has been done to diversify this parish’s channels of communication. The Messenger magazine is one stream among almost a dozen that we use regularly (you might say we could be more efficient in the channels we use, but that’s another discussion). This doesn’t mean that this magazine has ceased to be important or useful, but it does mean that its production must be considered alongside the other things that we do.

So there is, at least, an argument that we should not worry about the ending of a parish magazine. There *are* many churches that make do without one.

But...

The first – and non-negotiable – question is whether there is a parishioner with some of the right gifts and skills who is interested and willing to take up the role of editor. Without that person, the PCC and the Ministry Team can spend as much time as they like reflecting on the role of a modern church magazine, but nothing will happen.

Magazines are time and energy-consuming, and the deadlines (even in permanently bi-monthly or quarterly magazines) can be quite relentless. I will write occasional newsletters (and have done), I will take

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responsibility for notice sheets when they're needed (as I currently do), and I will accept the responsibility of penning the opening article on a regular basis; but I will not ever take on a full editorial role. I would also not ask a paid Administrator to take on the responsibility unless a budget has been set to ensure that magazine income is a major contributor to the Administrator cost.

Some of our magazines go to very public places – Residential and Care Homes, other Churches, schools, libraries, local media. Others can be picked up by visitors to church, especially at St Neots. Others are delivered by a very active team of distributors to dozens of households that include active attenders, the housebound, and those who come rarely or who have ceased to come for various reasons. Thank you, by the way, to David and Hilary, who have put in a great deal of hard work to co-ordinate the distribution over recent years; and thank you to all those who have taken their share of local deliveries.

Even if it is not as significant as it once was, the magazine is one of our most important shop windows – so we would be entitled to ask whether it has been doing that job effectively and well. Does it reach readers who might otherwise be untouched? Does it ask questions that set people thinking? Does it spark interest and draw people in? Does it excite people to put things in the diary and make an effort to be present? Any church's discussion of a magazine must ask those questions, preferably in a way that prevents the discussion from being directed towards a particular editor. If we have a willing editor, and a commitment to continue with a magazine, what is it that we really want the magazine to do.

There are some things that we really must not do. Long before something called GDPR came into our lives, it was inappropriate to put into the public domain private information about parishioners, their health and their whereabouts. GDPR has only intensified that. It's never appropriate to allow free expression of any viewpoint without editorial control: the parish is responsible for what is printed here (jointly with the individual authors of particular articles). And, of course, it is not appropriate to write things here that might bring Christian faith into disrepute.

So - the PCC has much to chew over in the third week of September. Its task will be easier if it knows that there is someone who can work with the ministry team and is able and willing to pick up the editorial reins. Maybe you are that person. Maybe you know someone else who will fit the bill. If we do gain a new editor, I will be writing an article again in mid October. If not...

Izzy (and Ann before you) – thank you! May your next steps be good ones...

(Fr) Paul.

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November-December 2023 Welcome Advent!

Unlike Lent, Advent varies in length. Last year, it was at its longest – 4 weeks, starting November 27th; this year, it's at its shortest – 3 weeks and one day, starting on December 3rd.

But what is Advent for? This might seem a strange question – don't we all know it's a season of preparation for what's coming?

Well, yes – but I think that description can distract us from the real purpose of the season.

When we talk of preparation, it's not long before we talk about 'preparing for Christmas'. When we do that, we soon find ourselves turning back to cards, trees and candles; decorations, presents and food; nativity plays, pantomimes and music; travel plans and television (add your own details as appropriate). We associate many or most of these things with Christmas, and if we do, they need preparing. We can also – if we're involved in church life – fall prey to the temptation of a certain sentimentalised spirituality: 'preparing to welcome the baby'; 'preparing to go to the manger'; 'preparing our hearts to welcome the Christ child'.

But Advent is really much more concerned with another kind of preparing. It's the kind of preparing that has little to do with the events in the Bethlehem area in 4BC, but has much more to do with preparing for eternity; preparing to be citizens of heaven; preparing for the end of all that is.

When we take this kind of Advent preparation seriously, it isn't something which has to be put off until the moment that a distant tenor sings 'I look from afar...'. It isn't something that has to wait for the first candle on the Advent wreath: it can start as soon as we are ready for it. It's a set of themes that the cycle of readings introduces to from the start of November onwards: readings about the communion of saints that have an eternal perspective; reminders of judgements spoken by the ancient prophets that also speak to us now; and Jesus' parables about the coming kingdom that are heard for as many weeks before Advent Sunday as they are afterwards. If you follow the church's cycle of daily readings, you realise that the great prophecies of Isaiah, of the Book of Daniel, and of the Book of Revelation, are all with us *\*before\** we start singing the great Advent hymns – and this is not simply so that we can hear them before they are crowded out by other commercial or sentimental messages.

Philip Larkin, the twentieth century poet, was no great friend of Christianity or of the institutional church. But in the poem 'Church Going' (a title of multiple meanings) he did coin a phrase about the church which has stuck in a useful way: he describes the Church as 'a serious house on serious earth'. A place where we take seriously the questions of life that matter deeply to most of us, even if we rarely stop to ask them openly: what endures? what matters? what is the purpose of it all? what is my destiny in life? in what can we all have hope?

The moment the church starts to talk about the four topics that are traditionally labelled 'The Last Things' (Death Judgement, Heaven, Hell), it can sound like it has nothing good to say. But conversation about such things doesn't have to be gloomy. It doesn't have to be doom-laden. It just needs to be 'real' – to acknowledge death for what it is *\*before\** declaring that God in Christ has done something which overcomes all that death brings; to acknowledge that the world that we inhabit is in so many ways transient and impermanent *\*before\** asserting that in God's providence the goodness of creation will endure; to acknowledge that we face judgement for our failures *\*before\** we discover that the all-embracing love of God does not consign us to destruction.

The Season of Advent has quite a complicated history. It's not always been the last four Sundays before Christmas. So I'm not at all embarrassed to choose hymns labelled as 'Advent' in the hymn book on earlier Autumn Sundays when bible readings point towards real Advent thought. And I rejoice in the option of placing red hangings and frontals in church before we move to deep purple: the depth of colour (with its reminders of martyrdom and sacrifice) invites deep thoughts, surely?

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So the Advent season may be at its shortest this year. But that doesn't mean our Advent thoughts have to be the shallowest. Let's take seriously the texts that speak of conflict, the visions of judgement, and the scriptural realism that reminds us of our transience. And then, once we have done that, perhaps we can properly hear John the Baptist's proclamations with fresh ears; and understand better the enormity of the undertaking that Mary commits herself to, when she says yes to God.

May this Advent be a time of truthfulness for us all, and a time when we recommit to the hope which is, in the end, the reason for all the busyness of the season.

Welcome Advent, indeed!

(Fr) Paul

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November-December (2): In praise of St Andrew...

I need to start with a declaration of interest.

Like my predecessor and my curate colleague (and one or two others in the parish), one of my names is Andrew(s). So I have an automatic soft spot for the disciple who doesn't get to be part of the 'inner three', and yet features in many of the most important moments in the Gospel.

I have also found myself in and near lots of churches dedicated to him. There are a fair number round here (Great Staughton is, of course, the nearest), and many of them are either among the oldest foundations (as can be clearly seen in my native northern counties, he was a popular saint in Anglo-Saxon England), or have been dedicated in the later nineteenth and early twentieth century as significant missionary centres among growing populations.

The first twelve years of my ordained ministry were closely connected to such churches: I was curate at St Andrew's Stanley; half of Sunderland University was in the team parish of Monkwearmouth, with a major St Andrew's among its churches; and the ancient parish church of Penrith (in which the window above is found) is one of a group of ancient St Andrew's churches almost as confusingly close as the St Mary's churches in St Neots! The church junior school of which I was a foundation governor had the Saltire (St Andrew's cross) on its badge, and its senior pupils always used to receive puzzled comments about not being Scottish when they went on their annual residential trip to Edinburgh.

So that's my interest – and it's good from time to time to act on interest, and invest in your heroes.

The trouble is... you can never really celebrate Andrew's feast on a Sunday. If his day lands on a Sunday, it will always be Advent Sunday – and the rules on which takes precedence are quite clear. The already-less-visible disciple is pushed further to the margins, while his brother Simon Peter (whose summer feast is a major day in the Church year) takes the limelight.

So let's remind ourselves of Andrew's roles in the Gospels.

He's a follower of John the Baptist before he's a follower of Jesus. We know he fishes with his brother Simon (Peter), and receives the same call, but John's gospel adds the interesting detail that he met Jesus first, and then went off to fetch his brother. He's at the feeding of the five thousand, and is the one who brings the lad with the loaves and the fishes to Jesus (albeit a bit sceptically). Later on, when Greeks come to Philip with the request to see Jesus, it's Andrew who is perceived as the person to speak to – the person with access.

Andrew thus has as many moments in the spotlight as Thomas, even if his sayings aren't quite as memorable: 'Rabbi, where are you staying?'; 'We have found the Messiah'; 'But what are they among so many?'. But he is, of course, around in all the scenes where the Twelve/Eleven are in the room; and because of his early energy to bring his brother, he is seen as the great first evangelist.

After the early events in the Book of Acts, Andrew's story becomes more legendary. Among the 'apocryphal' book written in centuries after the New Testament, there are 'Acts of Andrew' (though nothing in those old traditions, unlike the traditions around Peter, suggests that he was crucified in an unusual way). Ancient traditions link him with Greece, to Scythia, and to Ethiopia, and the claim was made that his remains were at Patras (and later taken to Constantinople). As the Eastern and Western churches started to go different ways, he was perceived as the Eastern Church's counterbalance to Peter and the claims of Rome – but by then he was also highly regarded in Anglo Saxon England (Rochester is the earliest cathedral bearing his name, but several churches in the Tyne Valley, including Hexham and Corbridge, come shortly after).

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And then there's Scotland – the eighth century legend that Rule took his relics from Patras to the Fife coast, and that place became a centre for the evangelisation of Eastern Scotland.

As for that unusual cross, the Saltire - the earliest evidence of the Saltire as his symbol is quite late. The cathedral of Autun in Central Burgundy holds the earliest evidence at around the turn of the first millennium.

Andrew has even been the symbol of partial reconciliation between eastern and western churches. In the middle ages, his supposed head found its way to Amalfi in Italy, and later to Rome. During the papacy of Paul VI (1963-78) the Pope returned it to the Patriarch of Constantinople as a gesture of reconciliation. And yes, he's also a Patron Saint of Russia.

So let's praise God for St Andrew – and remember the Collect for his day:

Almighty God, who gave such grace to your apostle Saint Andrew that he readily obeyed the call of your Son Jesus Christ and brought his brother with him: call us by your holy word, and give us grace to follow without delay and to tell the good news of your kingdom: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

(Fr) Paul.

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February 2024 - Celebrating our Cathedrals

When did you last visit a Church of England cathedral, other than the “Cathedral of Huntingdonshire”?

While many of our parish churches receive fewer visitors than they might have done a generation ago (with a few notable exceptions in tourist hotspots, or due to their notable size – e.g. Beverley, Tewkesbury, Hexham), the Church of England’s cathedrals have received growing numbers of pilgrims and tourists, though many more in some places than others.

I have had deep and long connections with several cathedrals, so I find it quite natural to gravitate towards them. Durham, Newcastle, Carlisle, Ripon, York, and Chester have all been important places for me, visited regularly for many different purposes. In these last four years, others have joined them. I have had friends on the staff of several more; and, in my time on General Synod, I took part in the discussions about Cathedral governance. So there aren’t many cathedrals I don’t know something about, and very few that I have never visited - Manchester, Bradford, Sheffield, Bristol, Chelmsford: I suspect I won’t get away with the last one for much longer (my English RC figures, by the way, are 7 visited, 12 not).

I know that, in some of the places I have lived and worked, cathedrals can seem rather peripheral to locals. But they are such an amazing resource: and they also offer models of some things that can be done, albeit on a rather smaller scale, at some larger parish churches too.

Firstly, they embody a regularity of prayer and worship that they all inherit from the monastic tradition (some of them – like Ely, Norwich and Durham – come directly from those traditions, of course), alongside an openness for visitors to come and pray quietly (whether or not they charge for general tourist admission). They have a commitment to quality that has been very evident in the age of live-streaming (even if some of them haven’t set up streaming of a quality to match). And they understand that their offering of worship is for the sake of a far wider community than those who turn up either on a Sunday or on the increasingly popular occasions when worship takes place during the week. These things are important in an era when so much in church life is changing almost beyond recognition.

Secondly, holding a deep reserve of history that often reaches back a thousand years, and connects into the stories of a wide area, they take seriously the need not only to act as conservators, but also as teachers and explainers of how that history speaks to our life today. Cathedrals *\*are\** museums (and sometimes have them as well): but living museums at which remembering (including remembering the many different ways in which the Christian story has been heard) is key to their mission. Treasures (whether in brick and stone, stained glass and sculpture, woodwork and metalwork, libraries or all things musical) are there to speak today, as well as to preserve the past.

Thirdly, they have a serious call to be a ‘serious house’: to wrestle with the large questions of faith and society. One of the Canons often has a responsibility to lead this, whether or not they’re called ‘Canon Theologian’. Exploring the faith – whether with newcomers or with people who have grappled with issues of faith all their lives – comes naturally, and there is no expectation that faith will deliver a package of easy answers or ‘one size fits all’ solutions.

Fourthly, they are a place of education – for schoolchildren, for universities nearby, for user of their libraries. This too is a monastic inheritance, but is not restricted to subjects recognisable in medieval times.

Fifthly, they are a place of celebration – a place where big organisations come to give thanks for what they have been able to do in service of the community, or to mark the yearly round of their work, or to hold a major display or musical event. Some church organisations save the best of their work for when they come to the cathedral or use the cathedral to add great value to something that would have much less resonance elsewhere.



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And lastly (in this article, but not necessarily in the total sum of things) they are places of hospitality: often – but not always – involving food; sometimes providing it with a commitment to the neediest, or to the rehabilitation of those providing it; but also a hospitality that tells people they are welcomed, and valued and loved (something which is hardest to embody in well-staffed pay-to-enter establishments, but that doesn't mean they don't try to embody it).

I hope it is obvious from the way that I have expressed these things that they are all something which our own parish – and not simply at “the Cathedral of Huntingdonshire”, though it is the most obvious place for some of it – can take up in smaller ways. Worship & Prayer; History; Serious thought; Education; Celebration; and Hospitality are all themes for us too, even if on a different scale.

If you haven't been to cathedrals recently – do go. Enjoy all the things they have to offer (even the food!) – and remember that we too can do some of that, even if our resources are rather more modest.

(Fr) Paul

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February 2024 (2) - Four years on...

On 1st March,

it's four years since the re-united parish came into existence, and we walked between the two churches.

Much has happened in the four years since, including a global pandemic and several major conflicts, but...

How are we doing?

Fr Paul writes: I gave myself a shock in the middle of January. Looking at some of the documents produced by St Neots Parish for Diocesan Mission Planning in early 2016 (i.e. twice as long ago), I realised that I needed to check up some statistics from both churches. It wasn't a great moment: the registers very quickly showed that normal Sunday morning congregations at both churches were almost exactly twice the size in 2016 than they are now. Some of the drop came in the four years between then and 2020. A bit more of it has come in the four years since. It isn't a happy experience to be the incumbent priest who discovers such a thing.

There are numerous factors in this, of course. Both churches – like much of the Church of England – have congregations heavily weighted towards older generations, and there have, sadly, been ill-health withdrawals and deaths. Significant numbers have moved away from St Neots. Many – often seeking more connection with family and other groups, or with other commitments as their children have grown – come much less frequently than they did. Some activities have had to stop, and many churches, post-Covid, have seen lower numbers in younger generations. Some people here have, I know, consciously chosen churches with a different style, or tradition, or leadership - or churches that they can more easily find transport to reach. But however many explanations we can find, it's not good to experience. Oh for an ordinary Sunday when more than 30 are at an Eynesbury morning service and more than 80 at the two at St Neots (the combined service figures were c.45 and c.130 in 2016, by the way).

But 'how are we doing?' wasn't meant to be a question about numbers. I was really wondering about other things: are we working well as a single parish?

There are many good signs. There is little of the language of 'them' and 'us'. People may mostly worship in the congregation that they feel most comfortable in, and some people may be more comfortable than others with going from time to time to the 'other place', but I sense that there is very little of the 'we're not like them' kind of language that can destroy all attempts to work together. We have unified communications (even if this magazine is nearing the end of its life). Our services have more common ground than they did before, and some people move very happily between the two places.

We have been helped by the demographics, of course. At the moment of amalgamation, the number of people living in the former Eynesbury parish who were on the St Neots electoral roll almost exactly equalled the number of people living in the former Eynesbury parish who were on the Eynesbury electoral roll: so there is not a strong tribal line among churchgoers at the Brook. People also come across the Great Ouse to both the churches (as they go in the other direction to be part of life at Eaton Socon).

We have been helped by the recognition that both churches have people with skills to make the whole work; people who understand their responsibilities to be to both buildings or both main congregations. Some ministers work happily and regularly in both places, while others are content to be only at one: both approaches are equally right.

We have been helped by a recognition that some services, or groups, or events, can happen much more easily in one space than in the other: and we have sometimes been able to point outside groups to a better place for the things they want to do.

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It has also helped that people are happy to cross the Henbrook for celebrations, and social and fundraising events held at the 'other' church, whether in blazing summer sunshine or piercing winter winds.

We don't always manage to think of ourselves as a single unit. Sometimes it's hard – each congregation tends to think of one church school as 'our' school, and the two schools are quite different places at the moment. But our finances and our processes are written as a single organisation, and we're doing quite well at not wasting resources through unnecessary duplication.

But let's not be complacent. We need to keep on recognising what an asset to us our partner church is. We need to keep on acknowledging that 'our church' cannot be what it is apart from a relationship with the other. And we need to keep seeking new ways in which a gathering that's largely from one place can still find itself at home in the other.

So, putting those awful statistics aside, it has been a decent start for the re-united parish. Let's hope it keeps on going that way.

(Fr) Paul.