**Sermon and Incumbent’s Report for APCM – 2024-04-28**

**John 15: 1-8 & Acts 8: 26-40**

At the APCM, we give thanks for all that is done in and for and through the church over the past year – those many, many tasks behind the scenes and during the week, as well as those upfront and on Sunday. John Betjeman’s poem “Septuagesima” (written in 1954) says it beautifully:
*Let’s praise the man who goes to light*
*The church stove on an icy night.*
*Let’s praise that hard-worked he or she*

*The Treasurer of the P.C.C.*
*Let’s praise the cleaner of the aisles,*
*The nave and candlesticks and tiles. . .* (*Poems in the Porch*, SPCK, 1954)

Thankfully, we have many, many people who carry these and the more up to date tasks needed in church. The majority fall under the purview of the Church Warden, whose role is to see that all things are done, not to do all themselves. Today, we especially say thank you to our Warden’s, David and Joan (as Joan steps down) and Deputies Jane and Pam (and Jane is standing down from her role too). They are the people whom we as clergy depend most. But it takes a whole church to carry out the whole mission God calls us to in this place. Everyone has their role.

A year ago, ministry in this parish was in a difficult place. We came through, thanks to the efforts and support of many, and this year feels much stronger. Last Sunday lunchtime, we enjoyed a celebration of Rev Lin’s ministry – her long overdue ‘welcome’ as permanent Assistant Minister. We give thanks for the many, many gifts she brings. We have been equally blessed by Rev Alison joining us as curate in this parish and by her many, many gifts, and look forward to her priesting in June. With this strengthened team, we have been able, cautiously (aware of the danger of over-stretch) to expand ministry and look for new opportunities for mission. So we have started the monthly Coffee, Chat, Craft and Communion on Saturdays at Good Shepherd; in Holy Week, three new evening reflective services; and on Good Friday, *Experience Easter* enabled families to engage with the Easter message in fresh ways.

Our mission is shaped by the word of God, and today’s readings provide pointers to that shape. My apologies that this may sound like a certain referendum you may prefer to forget, but two words sum it up: ‘Remain,’ and, ‘Leave’! However, for us, this is not an either/or but a both/and.

In one of Jesus’ great images of John’s Gospel, he pronounces: ‘I am the vine. You are the branches. Remain in me, and I in you, and you will bear much fruit.’ Remain, abide, linger, stay – these apparently passive words express what’s vital – connectedness with Christ: his life in our lives, his Spirit flowing through our hearts; his word in our ears; his body and his blood giving life to our mortal bodies – the church’s life of worship; the individual’s personal devotion in prayer. Remain in the Vine. Remain when it feels tough. Remain when, as Jesus puts it, his Father the gardener is doing the pruning, because that’s what’s necessary to be truly fruitful. ‘Remain in me and you will bear much fruit.’

‘Leave,’ said the Holy Spirit to Philip the deacon. Philip was having a very fruitful ministry in Jerusalem, but the Holy Spirit says leave and head down the southern road to Gaza. Mission begins with openness to the Spirit’s moving. On that road, he comes alongside someone else on their journey – Philip was literally running alongside the Ethiopian’s chariot. He listens carefully to what’s going on. He asks questions and offers help. He waits courteously to be invited in. Then, at the right time, he shares the good news of Jesus. Finally, he’s ready to respond to the Ethiopian’s response: Philip immediately baptises this man.

Many of us, I suspect, do the first part reasonably well – the coming alongside, the listening. But find the moment to speak, that we find harder. Seeking the right words to speak, we find ourselves suddenly reticent. Sharing the good news of Jesus, it doesn’t always come naturally.

Sometimes we have to leave behind our presuppositions, our self-consciousness, our fear of embarrassment and all sorts of things that are to do with us. Let the Holy Spirit make us lighter on our feet. Be ready, spiritually and emotionally, to ‘leave’ to do his work.

So where does that take us with our own parish and churches? In August, the PCC held a vision day, open for all church members to take part. From that day, a vision emerged – not detailed plans but four or five priorities the PCC, ministry team and others to work on.

Let’s start with Worship. Worship is about both ‘remain’ and ‘leave.’ It’s the principal way we remain in God’s presence, connected to the true Vine; and it’s proclamation of good news, the church’s shop window. A Parish Worship Committee has been formed, with membership completely open to all. So far, we have looked at music in worship, thinking about what inspires us and may attract others. (Rev Alison has brought her gifts and expertise here.) And we have looked at how Intercessions are led to best articulate our prayers for others. We’re not looking at revolutionary change to any existing services, but continually seeking to offer our best to God in worship.

Second, young people. If anyone asks for a description of our congregations, the word ‘aging’ crops up more than any other. We are desperate to reach out to and draw more younger people into the Vine that is Christ. Here we are especially indebted to Rev Lin, who brings her gifts and experience in working with children. She has a plan to renew provision for children on a Sunday morning, under the heading JAM – ‘Jesus and Me.’ But we know, as a general social trend, Sunday morning does not seem to be working for young families these days. We have a tremendous team, putting their energies into the family work of *Criss+Cross*, now into its second year, monthly on a Sunday afternoon. It’s still a young and fragile project, but is becoming more established, with growing numbers, really positive atmosphere, and the beginnings of a sense of community amongst the families.

The reality is that most children won’t be brought to church, so we seek to ‘leave’ and meet them where they are, in school. A big part of our ministry continues to be in schools work, especially at our Christ Church schools, but also developing opportunities at Castlecroft and Woodthorne, and St Regis Academy.

The third and fourth areas of vision are still to be looked at fully by the PCC: the headings are Community and Discipleship. Some ground work for both was carried out through our Lent course this year. Entitled *Act on Poverty*, it challenged how we live as Christians (our discipleship) and how we can engage with our wider communities in addressing poverty both locally and world-wide. We were encouraged to use this general election year to question parliamentary candidates about their party’s approach to tackling poverty.

Finally, a matter vital to mission in the modern age: the whole area of digital communication – websites, social media and the like. I am grateful to those who have struggled to keep the parish website up to date over the years. We have also maintained the practice of streaming services and widely distributing sermons and prayers – and we do get occasional feedback, demonstrating they do reach some surprising places. But we need to go further. Without a greater social media presence, I fear our best efforts at communicating with the wider world will go unnoticed. So, I am delighted that Stuart Cross (now with the title of Media Coordinator) and Ben Hemming have taken the initiative in getting going on matters most of us are not comfortable with. We look forward to how this develops.

Whatever the specifics for the year ahead, our vision must be that we are ready to ‘leave’ – that is to go out to reach those beyond our church communities – and we ‘remain’ within the true Vine who is Christ, the source of life and love.