

Bletsoe Rector's APCM Report April 2020

Dear Friends,

I write this report as we enter the sixth week of the government enforced lockdown due to the Coronavirus. As I write, I don't know what the future holds, either how long the situation will go on, what the outcome will be or what the life of our church will look like this time next year.

But as I look back on the past year, I rejoice at God's faithful and sustaining hand so clearly at work at St Mary's, which helps me to keep trusting in his sovereign goodness looking forward. If God has been good to us in the past, because he is unchanging and faithful, he continues to be good to us now, and will be good to us in the future (Hebrews 13:8; James 1:17; Malachi 3:6). This means we can continue to trust that God is working out his plans and purposes for the good of those who love him and the sake of his church (Romans 8:28), and this should fill us with great confidence.

And wow, has God been good to us over the past year!

One of the things the lockdown has taught me to appreciate even more, is the freedom we enjoy to be able to gather together week by week to offer our praise and thanksgiving to God, as we grow together in our faith in Jesus and love of one another. Of course we do not always find church easy, and there are no doubt things that we would all like to change, and sometimes we might have misunderstandings with fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, but I think the old saying, 'you don't know what you've got until it's gone' rings truer than ever at this time. We have a wonderful church family, and I miss terribly not being able to meet with you currently.

Our regular Sunday meetings have continued to be my highlight of the week, and being able to enjoy refreshments every week with the (near!) completion of the chancel refurbishment project has been a splendid addition to our gatherings.

The (nearly!) completed chancel has of course been a wonderful encouragement in itself. It seems a long time ago already, but what a marvellous occasion we enjoyed as we gave thanks to God for the provision of this restored place at the end of September. Led by the Bishop of Bedford, we remembered the importance of giving thanks (the Jelly Baby test!), and that we have a wonderfully generous God to give thanks to, not just for our building, but for his love demonstrated to us upon the Cross. The church was full, and we were joined by many friends from across the country for this special occasion, as well as the Sharnbrook Community Choir. Let me say once more a very BIG THANK YOU to David Baker and his team who have been leading the project, and the Friends of St Mary's who have worked tirelessly to see it through to completion. Our task now, once things get back to 'normal' is to consider how we can best use this space to serve the gospel and the community.

There also have been a number of other joyous moments this past year as we have gathered together, including Christmas and the Carol Service; the joint Church Weekend at Home with Riseley; the Harvest Supper; the Village Fete; our Church Coffee mornings; as well as the more poignant service we had to mark Remembrance Sunday.

However, the year has not been without sadness too. We have lost some dear brothers: Paul Crossley, Richard Strong and our Reader, Richard White who for a little while we no longer see each week. We give thanks to God for their lives, their faith, and their service of the gospel and thank God that we do not grieve without hope. Others too have had ups and downs, changes and challenges, sorrows and troubles, and whilst life can be hard, isn't it wonderful to be able to support and encourage each other in the messiness of life.

The Bletsoe house group has continued to meet this year on a Monday night, with positive reports being fed back from those involved. That is apart from the first Monday of the month, following the initiation of a monthly church prayer meeting, which takes place in the chancel. Before being disrupted by the lockdown, it had been wonderful to meet together to pray for each other, the needs of the church and of the world. Once we are allowed to meet in person again, I very much hope this meeting will continue to be a priority for us all.

This time last year, I wrote about the financial challenge facing the church. Whilst we thank God for people's wonderful generosity and giving, for the first time, St Mary's was unable to fully pay the financial contribution asked of us by the Diocese of St Albans. I am afraid that finances continue to be an area of concern for the PCC as we look to meet our various responsibilities and commitments for this coming year. Please can I ask you to continue to pray for this issue, especially as we anticipate our income being reduced following the impact of the Coronavirus with the closure of the church building for what is yet an undetermined period of time.

Finally, can I say a big thank you to everybody who has been involved in church life over the past year. There is so much hard work by so many people, much of it behind the scenes, that goes on to serve one another and the work of the gospel. Can I thank you for all that you have done and continue to do as we work together to hold out the word of truth and hope that we profess to the village of Bletsoe and the surrounding area. We, no doubt, will continue to face many challenges over the coming months and maybe even years, but we do so as God's chosen people, united by the saving death of our Lord Jesus Christ, trusting in his power and strength. To him be the glory, now and forever, Amen.

Revd. James Isaacs