

Vicar's Report, APCM 18th October, 2020

*I remember my affliction and my wandering,
the bitterness and the gall.*

*I well remember them,
and my soul is downcast within me.*

**Yet this I call to mind
and therefore I have hope:**

*Because of the LORD's great love we are not consumed,
for his compassions never fail.*

*They are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.*

Lamentations 3:19-23

Looking back to our last APCM on 28th April 2019, it was a time, even then, of transition with old members moving on and new ones arriving. I wrote:

With these changes, the way we do things at Christ Church will also inevitably change. But we need to view this as God's way of bringing new life. Jesus said of the Father that, 'He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.' (John 15:2) This reminds us that God is with us in the life's struggles and is working among us to bear fruit, although that can often take time to be evident. I see this as God birthing a new church from the old, and would encourage us to be prayerful and active to ensure that the abundance and blessing of God's plans are fulfilled.

Over the intervening year-and-a-half, much more has changed than I could ever have ever imagined. At the end of last year our long-term worship leader Tim felt called to move on and so Catherine took up that role. Sharon then took up the admin role that Catherine had done for seven years. (Where did the time go?!) So my especial thanks go to Tim for his service over the years, to Sharon for taking up the admin and to Catherine who was so faithful as administrator and has proved to be so anointed in the worship leading role.

From December 2019 to the present we have been studying Luke's gospel in our Sunday worship. The aim was two-fold: firstly, to root us more firmly in God's word but, also, to refocus our Christian walk on Christ himself. To grow as a Christian is to grow more like Christ! I am also looking at re-wording our church mission statement to keep that focus on Christ at the centre – something the PCC has already begun to look at and will revisit once our new PCC is in place.

Last year also we took our facilities review to the next stage. Having consulted about options how best the building could be used, and re-ordered, for that purpose, temporary facilities were obtained to allow experimentation with the church layout. The communion table was moved forward, and the curtain behind the table removed and replaced with LED uplighters. The chapel was made a bit more distinct and better furnished to make it more suitable for prayer and the rear pews were removed to enable the back of church to be used as a café area. We are still looking at these questions and we are taking a new faculty out in order to continue the experiment. The motivation for these innovations is to be better equipped to fulfil our threefold vision of being a house of prayer, a healing place and a training place.

All these plans have been impacted – but not stopped – by the dramatic events of the last six months.

From 22 March to 2 August Christ Church was forced to shut for Sunday worship. This is unprecedented in the history of Christ Church, and indeed, the Church of England. But we

complied with the Bishop's guidelines and government legislation, so as to play our part in overcoming the threat of coronavirus.

At the start of this I was on sick leave but Laura (as Curate), and the wardens, Deb and Olu, teamed up with Sharon, Lynne, Michael and Gill to form a lockdown leadership team. From week one they established online worship, which is still continuing. This was later supplemented by a phone-in service (from 19th April) and then a 9am Communion service, commencing 9th August. The aim throughout has been to make worship accessible to as many people as possible. I remain eternally grateful to the team for sharing the burden of responsibility at a time when legislation was changing daily and making the wrong decisions could cost lives.

As a church we have kept in contact with one another by the buddy scheme, as well as printed prayer booklets, newsletters, zoom meetings, phone calls and socially distanced chats. We have sought to support the community, providing Aldi vouchers to a local school for families in need, as well as utilising the commonwealth fund to support families in difficulty. We have continued to support the foodbank at this time of need. The night shelter will continue this winter but with the council funding the key worker and providing bed and breakfast for twelve clients. It is a mark of the trust the shelter has established that the council is happy to partner in this way, and Michael has been crucial in facilitating this. We are also continuing the tradition of collecting shoeboxes of Christmas gifts, but this year it's through the charity Amen Trust, run by Gareth Boulton, a local Christian and missionary, and a good friend to Christ Church.

I have thanked the lockdown team but many others have helped at church looking out for other people, helping to staff events, like the prayer afternoons, and continuing to serve behind the scenes. Three of our volunteers, who are now standing down, deserve particular mention: Sarah Jay as PCC secretary, Tony Addison as Assistant Warden and Jacky Robinson as Hall Booking Secretary. These tasks are being reallocated, and an important aim for the coming weeks is to widen participation so that the core team are not overburdened and everyone can express their gifting and worship through acts of service.

As I close, I want to acknowledge the huge loss many have borne in these recent months. Many have lost dear friends or family members, others have experienced lasting damage to their health, many have faced isolation, mental health difficulties or loss of employment. And yet, also, God has been at work. We have had four people, to date, start coming to events at Christ Church, having seen our online worship. And others are testifying to deepened family relationships through having concentrated time together, and others again have found it a time to seek God in prayer.

As I quoted in my opening verse, we have hope because, even in adversity, God is faithful and His nature is to have mercy – upon that we depend.

God bless,

Richard