

## PARISH PRIEST'S REPORT TO THE ANNUAL PAROCHIAL CHURCH MEETING 2018

My report this year must begin by recording the sudden passing of my predecessor, The Rev'd Prebendary Alan Jones, following a short illness in January. Fr Alan was just three weeks into his time at Interim Minister at St Paul's Coven. His was a most distinguished tenure here at Ettingshall, and the imprint he left on all our lives is profound. We continue to mourn his loss, and we pray for Karen in particular; we continue to do all we can to assist the parish of Coven in the vacancy. Fr Alan's Requiem took place here, celebrated by his good friend Bishop Nicholas Reade – it was an occasion which saw the parish at its very best.

This is my third report to the Annual Parish Meeting here at Holy Trinity. So much has happened, and changed, in the course of the year. Our setting in the wider context of the Church of England, and in the Universal Church generally, is something we tend to gloss over in the face of more local, visible challenge; but it is as well to acknowledge the challenges to church life and understanding which I encounter as I go about my wider roles in the church, and most especially my membership of the General Synod. I am at once fascinated and horrified by what I have encountered since being elected in 2015. It is a political world like no other, and whilst the language of holiness and discernment is employed, it is often as a veneer for campaigning of a rather brutal sort. It seems a world away from the mutual love and compassion embodied by our Saviour.

Issues such as the outworking of the Five Guiding Principles in connection with the nomination and subsequent withdrawal of Bishop Philip North to the See of Sheffield, and the naked challenges which are made to agreed settlements have caused a good deal of concern to members of the Society of St Wilfrid and St Hilda, as well as to other people of good conscience in the church; constant debates about the nature of Human Sexuality, Natural Law and Holy Scripture are being conducted as a zero-sum game, in which there will be victors and losers. We pray for fresh vision and inspiration in these and other things, not least the more pressing concerns of evangelization and mission in a local church context, which is what ought to be taking up our time.

Much of the profile of the church nationally at present is represented in the historic failure of the institutional church to ensure the safety of children and vulnerable adults, resulting in unsavoury publicity and (more importantly) revelations of abuse causing immense suffering in the lives of countless individuals. Our need to adhere to the evolving legislation and advice in the field of safeguarding children and vulnerable adults is critical; this requires us to be scrupulous in our policies, our practices and in our conduct. Val Shepherd has graciously undertaken this role in guiding up into a more complete compliance, and I am immensely grateful to her for all that she is doing in enabling those who require it to go through the necessary DBS (Disclosure and Barring Service) checks.

My original funding for the Diocesan part of my post comes to an end on Tuesday, and 23<sup>rd</sup> May marks my third anniversary in post. The funding for the post has been extended for a further three years. That I can continue here at all is due to the support of Diocesan Secretary Julie Jones, Bishop Clive of Wolverhampton, and Bishop Michael of Lichfield. I thank them for the continued trust they place in me. In addition to the work I have been undertaking more widely in the Diocese I have been asked by Bishop Jonathan to act as one of his two representatives in the Diocese, as a point of contact and advice to other Society parishes. I was also invited, less than a year ago, to take up the position of Clerical Chair of Forward in Faith in the Diocese. These roles complement one another, and enable me to serve the parishes in a variety of ways. I also continue to receive invitations to speak to diocesan and national gatherings of clergy and laity, and in particular have been invited to preach at this year's National Pilgrimage to Glastonbury.

We have been delighted this year by the ordination to the diaconate of Fr Adam Edwards. What a rich blessing he is to us. He is devout, wise, hard working and thoroughly cheerful, and will in due time bless us all in priestly orders. The year has flown, and soon we will surround him with our love and prayers as he is ordained, God willing, to the sacred priesthood, by Bishop Jonathan, on June 24, and he will proceed to celebrate his First Mass here the following evening. Both of these are moments of immense significance both to Fr Adam and to the wider church, and I hope that both events will be 'standing room only.' I am

greatly in Fr Adam's debt for his support, his willingness to contribute and his sheer prayerfully positivity. He is wonderfully well supported by Lucinda despite the miles each has to travel.

The following week, in Blackburn Cathedral, our daughter Rebecca will be ordained by Bishop Philip to the diaconate. This will be a moment of utter joy in our family, and I know in the wider church family as well. Despite her busy life in training Rebecca is well known to the parish, and I know she is so grateful for the expressions of support and encouragement she has received from members of the parish. Please pray for her.

We have been gladdened and enriched by the return of Fr. Roger Gilbert following his distinguished tenure as Interim Minister at Armitage. He is a wonderful blessing and support to us; the reaction of the parish on his return was one of unbridled joy. It is simply wonderful to have such a holy and faithful priest among us again.

A most important development in our life together has been the ministry of Jane Scott. This has particularly been evident in her preaching, but is something we can expect to develop most particularly as she prepares to be officially licensed as a Reader in September. It will be an important staging post on a long road, which has most especially seen her commit a great deal of time to a most demanding course of preparation, which she has undertaken with characteristic determination and courage.

It is the joy of the Christian to **pray** and **worship** daily, regardless of circumstance. We are people bound together in the Mass, strengthened by our praying together and apart. This makes our gatherings unique. It is so good to offer the Mass frequently during the week. Worship demands the very best of us: there should be a sense of **expectation** before worship, as we enter into a place where we encounter the living God, and where He reveals His will for us. I cannot stress how important this preparation is. From Nave to Choir to Sanctuary to Sacristy, we are embarked upon a **sacred undertaking** which we cannot fulfill if the desire to worship free from distraction is absent. As a worshipping community we have a covenant in which we expect much from God, from one another and from ourselves, and that begins with the business of 'setting the scene' for worshipping together in silence and stillness.

We are a community of ambition for God. We have many plans to enable us to reveal the Kingdom of God more effectively. Some of these plans involve a great deal of commitment and sacrifice. The project to ease the access problems to the church is an obvious example. This has already gone through various stages, with plans and ideas shuttling back and forth between the fabric group, the Diocese and the Architect. There will need to be a major fundraising effort for this – but we cannot 'go public' on these ideas until we have a plan which we know

- a) Will meet the approval of the Diocesan Advisory Committee
- b) Will satisfy the local authority and our near neighbours
- c) Will have a cost and time scale which will be realistic and achievable
- d) Will meet the very specific needs of all who wish to enjoy the space, and to worship there.

All of this is immensely complicated. There are permissions to be gained, from Local Authority and Church, and conversations to be had with near neighbours. Not for nothing did the DAC remark that we possess 'the worst access of any church in the Diocese.' I cannot express adequately my thanks to Barry Perks and the rest of the Fabric Group who continue to work hard under a real sense of challenge and constraint. Please pray for this work. We will need to be patient if these plans are to come to fruition.

In addition to this plans are reasonably well advanced for the refurbishment of the kitchen – always a significant place in the missional life of the church, creating as it does a hub of hospitality and well being. To be able to welcome, with food and refreshment, visitors to church is a major piece in the jigsaw of what we are trying to achieve. This work has been spearheaded by Janet Skidmore and Dennis Richards, alongside the fundraising skills of Father Adam. We look forward to all this coming together before the next Annual Meeting.

This gives just a snapshot of some of what our churchwardens do in our name. Janet and Barry are a marvellous team, and commit so much time to the ongoing life and ministry of the parish. We rely on them in so many ways – and often ways which remain unseen to the casual glance. They are both people who do

good by stealth, and who execute their offices supremely well. I am very much in their debt, as I am to Beryl Fisher and Geoffrey Proffitt, both of whom make the rather scary business of trying to grow the church through prayerful, calculated risk rather less scary than it can sometimes feel. Not only do they exercise their offices – they provide a sympathetic ear and a great deal of understanding as ideas are thought through and refined. The work of the Parish Treasurer is demanding, as Geoff knows. But he combines a splendid sense of rigorous care with forensic attention and a heart for mission and trying things out. I could not ask for more.

The PCC in so many parishes is a place of contention, of discord and mistrust. It is not so here. In paying tribute to the PCC members I would like to thank them for their support as we try to seize opportunities which are presented to us. Sometimes things occur at great pace, and the only way to seize them is to move similarly quickly. We also have to exercise patience when things don't move as quickly as we would like. I would like to thank the PCC for their unswerving support, patience and forbearance. At least they know that life is never dull!

Much still needs to be done if we are to ensure a healthy future for this parish. We will continue to seek ways and opportunities for the proclamation of the gospel, as we seek to grow in **number**, in **discipleship** and in our **strength** as a 'Civilization of Love' (Pope Paul VI). Our work with children and young people is bearing fruit, both in 'event' terms and also on our deepening liaison with our local schools and uniformed organizations. We continue to strive to make our **liturgy a thing of beauty**, accessible to all; and we will continue to develop our ministry of welcome. The monthly Men's Breakfast continues to develop in a whole host of ways. The recent launch of our 'Third Sunday' Initiative – helping us as a parish to explore matters of faith and Christian living in greater depth - is a further sign of our desire to grow.

Inevitably (and in addition to Fr. Alan) we have mourned the loss of Joan Pedley, David Lockett, Nita Gilbert and Vi Gutteridge, souls who were in different ways integral to our life at Holy Trinity. We continue to be grateful for all they meant to us, to pray for the repose of their souls, and to express our love and support to those who most keenly mourn their loss. Jesus, mercy, Mary, pray.

My final words are ones of gratitude – to Almighty God, for his abundant grace in the presence of many challenges: to all parishioners and members of the wider community of parish and diocese, for a real and genuine partnership in the gospel. To those who share the task of leading this church and parish, thank you for accepting the challenge of leadership in Christ's church, for your friendship and support. . My especial thanks go to Fiona, for her unstinting love and support whilst facing the challenges of a demanding professional life, and to Rebecca, Patrick and Ellie.

FR DAMIAN FEENEY SSC  
Parish Priest  
April 2018