

In Summary!

Ecclesiastes 1²⁻¹²⁻¹⁴ 2¹⁸⁻²³; Psalm 49¹⁻⁹; Colossians 3¹⁻¹¹; Luke 12¹³⁻²¹

*Set your mind on things that are above, not on things that are on earth.
[Colossians 3²]*

I am never sure what to say on a day like this: some will be expecting a road-map into the future; others may be expecting my characteristically subtle, PC and gentle review of the state of the Church; still others may want me to take the gloves off and say what I think about the Parish and the people.

If I were to review the current state of the Church of England it would be to say that in funding everything apart from the Parishes, the Church of England has betrayed its heritage. Its leadership needs the moral courage to speak truth to power and to unashamedly point to Christ.

More generally, it is also the case that ministry is undervalued. When I was ordained first as a Baptist in 1985 we envied the Church of England stipend – at that time equivalent to a Head Teacher in a Primary School. Now we are paid less than a teacher in their first year of training and that means most clergy live in fuel poverty and are struggling. Effectively, the Church has made the paid Parish posts a second-income job for a family and that, in its turn, has had a bearing on the quality of the people coming forward. How few theologians there are in the Church at the coal-face of ministry and that does have a bearing on the ability to open Scripture and to engage Biblically with the issues in our society.

Of course, we have fought battles here with all sorts of institutions and bodies and have generally won (with the exception of school parents parking by the Rectory). I have been threatened with knives and guns and been accused of racism, amongst other things. That is the rich territory that Handsworth is. Yet it is the most rewarding of places – when you move beyond the woke and the trendy and meet real people, God is in that encounter and that is why we are here.

When my ministry here begun just before Holy Week in 2015 we took the first year and laid the foundations for what would follow – every Sunday had some reference to a simple theme: *It's all about Jesus!* Hopefully, everything that has followed – whether it has been to do with buildings, the community, the Parish, or in Pastoral situations – has built on that: Church is nothing is it isn't about Jesus.

What we focus on matters – and the challenge for us all is that we continue to look to Jesus. The temptation is that, in an interregnum, the work of the Church goes into hibernation and that is dishonouring to God. I am not the Church, you are not the Church, it is us all together that make up the Church. You will get a new Rector, the person God has chosen for you, but they must join the momentum that you will sustain.

Allow me to say three things in ascending order of importance:

✘ **Place**

We have worked hard to make this place worthy of God! Keep it that way!

The appreciation of beauty is something unique to human beings and therefore has to be part of the image of God that we all bear. That said, this building is designed to make us look up and in looking up to encounter the God this place honours. It is an enormous privilege to worship on a site that has been prayed in for over 1000 years.

I had thought of preparing a pack of laminated cards to give to the Churchwardens (Fr Bob says, the answer is yes and we work out how it is done; Fr Bob says, don't put it down put it away; Fr Bob says, 'this'll do' isn't good enough for God; Fr Bob says, do it yesterday not tomorrow; Fr Bob says, you can always smell a good Church; etc) but they may just become clutter and that wouldn't do.

We don't worship the building, we worship in the building. It is our shop window and at concerts, Jazz Festivals, Christmass Tree Festivals the stained glass, the cross and the altar silently, subtly, engage in our mission of making Christ known.

✘ Parish

The Parish system, where everyone belongs and where the Priest has the duty of the care of souls for all within its boundaries – and so all of England is cared for – is the unique jewel in the crown of the Established Church and that Establishment continues to ignore and betray it by not funding it.

The Church must never become a self-serving club for members – remember that is a lifeboat and never a cruise ship! Our duty and our calling is to make Christ known and to make a difference in Christ's name. It was Dr Martin Luther King Jr who said, *darkness cannot drive out darkness, only light can; hate cannot drive out hate, only love can.* That is the work of the Parish Church – light and love: not any variety, but the light of Christ and the love Christ made known on the cross that leads to resurrection and hope.

✘ People

Paul in his Epistle to the Colossians is very practical, even brutal, about how different people are in relationship with one another once they **have been raised with Christ** for then they **seek the things that are above**. They **put to death whatever in you is earthly** the things that lead to the **wrath of God**. Paul lists the things that betray our faith and fracture our relationships: **anger; wrath; malice; slander; abusive language; lying**.

What Paul sets out is a world in which there are no distinctions, social, racial, economic, other than those who are in Christ and those who are not. The task of a Parish Church is to love the unlovable, welcome the undesirable and to embrace the distant and to do so as Jesus would.

The challenge facing this Parish and congregation is the same that faces every Church and that is the need to grow and to know that this will be achieved through telling people about Jesus, being good adverts for him and by a genuine welcome that doesn't expect people to become like us but to become like Jesus.

One of the things that has really impressed me in this area is the creativity of those who try to get money out of you for drugs and alcohol – they are relentless, passionate and persistent about achieving their single aim.

My appeal to you as I hand this ministry over to you is that you are as relentless, passionate and persistent about this place, this parish and its people so that the future builds on what has been, as it has for a thousand years, and all to the glory of God.

For the Notices:

I was told off very severely when I was starting off as a minister in the Church. My boss overheard me thanking someone for coming to Church. He shouted at me and told me in no uncertain terms that I was never to do that again – they should be thanking us for the privilege of attending worship! I have never again thanked anyone for attending worship!

However, this morning, before we begin our service Penny and I do want to thank you all for your love and support since 2015. It has been our privilege to serve you. I also want to say a particular thank you to:

- ✘ Keith and Doreen and also now William who have served as my Churchwardens – there is a vast amount for Wardens to do that is largely unseen;
- ✘ To Edna who, as Treasurer, has kept us afloat, sometimes only just during the reordering and who also has made sure that there is always clean linen available for the Eucharist;
- ✘ To those who have served on the PCC, the Finance and General Purposes Committee and the Social and Fundraising Committee;
- ✘ To the musicians, especially those who remained alive, to James and Khadeem;
- ✘ To Adam and Chris and the team who make sure you can hear and those at home can see;
- ✘ To the sidespersons and servers, who support our services and especially to Graham who has loyally supported every service and cheerfully gone outside his comfort zone when we do something new;
- ✘ To George and Shane for their faithful litter picking every week.

Now to the important stuff – to God!