

## **Vicar 's address to the PCC AGM 2011**

### **1 HOME LIFE**

The vicarage remains a delight to live in although it often feels quite empty without the children. The elder two now rarely visit with their own busy lives to lead. I keep reminding them that Catherine and I are entering the "Grandparent" stage of our lives. The garden is hard work – it is probably a good thing to keep me in reasonable health doing a bit of manual labour in the grounds, but weeks go by without being able (or having the inclination) to doing anything. The quality of the soil has improved dramatically with the manure that was applied last year and we have a good, if not quite self-sufficient, supply of potatoes, onions, beans, salad crops, plums, apples etc.etc. As a born urbanite, its good to have a connection with the soil. I've absolutely loved the occasional visits to the farms round about. I would never dream of saying I would make a good "rural minister" (there are particular talents for that), but it's lovely to know that the working countryside is part of the parish.

### **2 THE WORSHIP**

The figures for church worship show in the church year to Advent Sunday 2010 there were 4266 acts of communion (including home communions) 33 Thanksgiving for the Gift of a Child, 50 Baptisms (2 adult), 11 weddings, 32 church funerals and 16 at the crematorium only. All of these figures are much the same as last year which amidst the siren calls of the church in decline, is at least not discouraging!

Our regular Sunday 10.00am congregation has shown signs of slight growth but it is sad to see the early morning Sunday and mid-week BCP attendance drop considerably over the past year. The monthly informal Sunday Evening Eucharist has settled into a regular pattern and I have now introduced Prayers for Healing and Reconciliation and the laying on of hands.

As a town civic church we have been called to minister at the Chairman's Inaugural Service and the Armed Forces Day Service. Remembrance Sunday, at the war memorial and afterwards in church, continues, as in the past few years, to attract more and more people. Churches Together in Sandbach struggles somewhat, yet continued the series of ecumenical events throughout the year in various locations. The work it does is appreciated by those involved and it keeps the lines of communication open between the various Churches. This year we intend to do a number of "pulpit swaps".

Once again we were involved in the work with schools. Offley Primary children have visited on a number of occasion, once to enact a typical church wedding (with chocolate cake and pink lemonade to conclude!). One class from Sandbach Primary made the church a special topic for a project about the issues of the funding of historic buildings in Sandbach. There was even a plasticine model of the vicar as part of a short film animation. Sandbach School held their annual founders day commemoration in October and there were four School Carol services attended by nearly 2000 - the church at its busiest. It was at the end of that week, which had been particularly cold, that we ran out of oil for first of three times in the month of December. During that time we had the interesting and intimate experience of worshipping in the church hall. This was a good time as it led to a fresh sense of community and a closeness that the church itself rarely gives week by week. Then came the thaw on St Stephens' Day. The radiator in the Choir Vestry emptied hot water under pressure over the entire room. There was a flood of water on the carpet which was ruined, over the walls and light fittings rust stains and over all the stock of choir books, prayer and hymn books and musical instruments. Damage was done to the pump in the boiler room beneath. From the flooding, there was little that could be

salvaged, although Catherine gave the entire stock of choir robes a wash which saved them from permanent rust stains. The insurers have been very helpful and we have been able to replace the secondhand and worn out hymn book with a brand new hymn book. This will cost us nothing. So today we have retired "New English Hymnal" and replaced it with "Common Praise" which is an excellent successor to the highly acclaimed "Hymns Ancient and Modern". I expect the new book to last at least for the next decade. Sixty new prayer books also have been bought.

The next thing to say is exactly the same as the previous two years – to remind you that I put great store by the "Occasional Offices" and through them I probably come in contact with several thousand people every year that have nothing directly to do with St Mary's Church. Like most other active Anglican priests, I guess that more than 80% of my time is devoted to those who do not come to church. As a sign of the increasing effectiveness of this ministry, it often takes an hour or so just to get a little shopping done in town. Someone always wants to say a word! As age gets to me, I'm often stumped by names, yet can usually remember life histories and situations. It's an amazing privilege, and over the past two years (they have flown by!) I have been able to understand at a fairly deep level the complexity of the story of Sandbach through the interweaving of the histories of its inhabitants. It's a rich and diverse area full of good people who have few pretensions and often remarkably tolerant and self-effacing. It's also a people that love the church. They may not come or support it financially, but they still do not instinctively feel it is a total irrelevance and are comforted by its presence when they need it to celebrate the joys and sorrows of life.

Let me remind you of some of the particular work I do in the community. I still serve as Wing Chaplain to the ATC (Air Training Corps) East Cheshire and South Manchester Wing and as a member of the Criminal Justice Group who meet regularly in our local prisons to support the work of our Diocesan Prison Chaplaincy service. I have been involved in the Local Authority's Standing Council for Religious Education (SACRE) and part of the team responsible for re-writing the latest revision of the Cheshire East's Agreed Syllabus for use in LA Maintained Schools. I'm involved as one of the Governors at Offley Primary School. The staff and governor tea on the vicarage lawn at the end of summer term will I hope become a regular feature. I feel very proud to have been asked to be involved in these very different groups, and know that I bring little expertise and even less time to each one of them. However I have learnt that the church's presence is an encouragement to others who do the work.

It is a wonderful pastoral opportunity and I'm forever hearing the same sort of personal stories about the joys and sorrows of life, as I would from a more generally mainstream pastoral ministry. This is surely what we are all called to do in our own homes and places of leisure and work - indeed in whatever situation we are in. Yet I also know that the ordained ministry gives an unparalleled permission to enter quickly and deeply into people's lives.

### 3 THE MINISTRY

In a few months time we will be hiring a coach to take us to Chester Cathedral for the licensing service of Jane Colley as a Reader. I'm so grateful for her ministry amongst us. Often I depend upon her insights and suggestions. She is beginning to develop a "voice" of her own in the pulpit and I'm always pleased with the way in which she leads public worship. It is often difficult to say the daily office by oneself, and I'm particularly grateful to her for being at Morning Prayer three times a week. I think she is to become a very good, pastorally sensitive and prayerful minister of the Word.

In recent weeks we have been pleased to welcome Lynne Cullens to fulfill part of her training for the Ordained Ministry. This has been a fruitful placement and she has made a considerable impact upon study groups and worship. We wish her well during the completion of her training and her future ministry in the church. Perhaps we should press for a curate at St Mary's? There is certainly enough work to be done, experiences to be had and initiatives to be started! We will see.

I'm very happy indeed about the way Lay involvement is working in public worship with rotas for reading the lesson, leading the intercessions and administering the chalice. Vera is still organising them. I am grateful to all who have felt able to offer themselves for these ministries.

I'm immensely encouraged by all the sense of God's call to various and varied ministries apparent in the parish - it is very heartening indeed. As your incumbent I'm supposed to encourage vocations and would urge any others of you who feel called by God to any form of ministry (especially the priestly ministry) not to ignore it! And thanks are due! It is dangerous to name people because you run the risk of missing someone out!

I will take that risk. Thanks are due to: The Wardens and sidesmen and women who keep the West end going throughout the services.

Sylvia for her untiring support to the PCC in minute taking and production of working documents (and more recently for taking on the hall bookings as a temporary measure). Paul our financial advisor and Roger our Parish Treasurer for keeping a close and beady eye on the finances. June and Catherine who keep me in order before, during and after weddings and funerals. (They often have to listen to my hostile concern about photographers at weddings!). Our flower ladies whose work goes on all year round and is most apparent at Easter and Christmas. Those who make the refreshments week by week and cheerfully clear up afterwards. The outstanding ministry of the Thursday Teas (we really must find a snappier title!) both as a place for many to meet and chat but also to be fed and watered. Alan Bourne for developing and maintaining the website. These are but a few -there are many others. To you all a big thank you for your support and energy in keeping St Mary's going.

As I said last year a "Friends of St Mary's" needed starting to promote the renovation and maintenance of the church building and historic fabric as the responsibility of all the people of Sandbach. We can do our bit as a worshipping community, but our responsibilities are to the maintenance of the Christian ministry in the place. The "Friends" needs to galvanise the local community to the importance of their historic church building. Responses to general requests for local finance usually amount to nothing whatsoever. There will be a need for many thousands of pounds to complete the funding of the third part of the roofing project in the next five years. Gail has taken charge of the friends and I have given her the rather grand title of "Heritage Co-ordinator". She is coming up with some good ideas about developing strategic fundraising.

A parish this size and complexity generates big issues of management and that often falls to the vicar, which often means there is little forward planning. Often I miss papers that need attention. As I said last year, it would be good to see a part-time parish secretary employed to manage what will become an increasing and inevitable amount of paper work.

Also I said last year we know there is a constant vigilance about the budget and pressing need to improve general giving. It is a cause for real concern and I make no apology for mentioning it again. It is however the story behind the figures upon which

I would wish to concentrate. In many respects we are a wealthy parish, and once upon a time there was a decent enough historic reserve. You will by now all know that that has gone. People outside (and some inside) the church community believe that we are wealthy and that we get grants from national government, the local authority or other charities. We get no help whatsoever for the day to day running costs. External agencies do not give to religious bodies anyway. We exist right on the edge of insolvency. We need to work towards a situation where our expenditure is matched by our regular giving. There is no easy way out here, but by a considerable increase in giving. I recognise appreciatively the sacrificial giving of many and equally am aware that many of you are on fixed incomes and that you face similar increases in the cost of living as does the Church, but would ask you to prayerfully consider if possible increasing your financial support. At the same time we are working hard on strategies to encourage those on the fringe of our fellowship to regularly support their parish church. It is very hard still to get the message across that the £1 coin has considerably less value now than when decimalisation was introduced in 1971. It is shameful that it is normative on the collection plate. Many gave £1 then and still do now. Put into context £1 in 1971 would buy 33 second class stamps and 20 first class. Now it is three 2nd and two 1st. Need I say more about the change in value of things? Please respond with continuing enthusiasm and encourage others to do the same.

#### 4 THE BUILDINGS

Much of the year has been taken up with the details associated with the Tower Project. I am delighted that Reg Dunning has steered the work on our behalf on the second stage of the roof replacement. Tony and Trevor have for years been managing the hall, the bookings and the building. Both asked when I arrived two years ago to be relieved of their duties, now we have found them replacements and with very grateful thanks we thank them for years of faithful work on our behalf. Recently the issues about the church hall have become even more pressing. The lavatories and kitchen are in desperate need of replacement and the heating system is oil-fired and very expensive. I often have to remind people that the church hall is exactly that, a CHURCH hall. It is not a community hall or village hall. As such it is for use by the church community. As often we have spare capacity, we are able to let others use it. But in so doing we must recover the basic costs of running it and can no longer subsidise other groups. At present there are a number of bookings that are paying considerably under a break-even rate. Some groups feel aggrieved that we are having to increase our rates. There are several other places in Sandbach with community facilities that may be happy to subsidise them - we no longer have the luxury of such largesse. This should encourage us to take stock about the future of the church hall. Is this building fit for another thirty years or so? Will it be the right building for that time? And given no constraints whatsoever, what about taking stock of the whole area of the church hall and church? Could a new vision for the "plant" of St Mary's be a useful discussion for the next decade? Dilapidated, worn out and weary buildings attract no one to the worship in the church, or that we are professional in our care of our church hall. We should have and expect to have buildings that are fresh and fit for purpose as well as beautifully maintained and treasured icons of the past. I would not wish to dispose of the past, but when it becomes threadbare and worn out it is not worthy or fit for preservation.

July 13th this year marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Sir George Gilbert Scott. As far as I can see this is not being celebrated by anyone. He was, as you will be aware, the main architect of Victorian Sandbach. St Mary's is not alone in finding

the legacy of his building work at times somewhat difficult to use now. Just ask the town council about the "Literary Institute" if you don't believe me! That his work was considerable and usually of a very high standard, should not enslave us 150 years later. There are many Victorian design features are less than accommodating in the 21st century. I'm often amazed how uncomfortable the seating is and yet how we still feel able to put up with the discomfort and pain. Recently someone even commented that "to come to church should never be a comfortable experience". I beg to differ! Even last week someone brought their own collapsable chair to sit in at a funeral. I would encourage you to read the challenging essay by the former director of the Victoria & Albert Museum, Sir Roy Strong delivered a few years ago to Gresham College. Entitled "The Beauty of Holiness and its Perils (or what is to happen to 10,000 parish churches?)" (<http://www.gresham.ac.uk/lectures-and-events/the-beauty-of-holiness-and-its-perils-or-what-is-to-happen-to-10000-parish>) he argued quite passionately that the survival of the Church of England's large stock of architecturally and culturally significant churches (Sandbach St Mary's being a case in point) will depend not so much in preserving the past but in adapting a building for the future. This he argued is has always been the case. The church building as part of the community in which it exists has always been changed and recycled to meet the needs of the community for the present time. Perhaps it is time to look at our church in respect of its future use in Sandbach by its inhabitants- to meaningfully give it back to the town for the general use of the community and to make the space and facilities inside useful and welcoming to a society that has little real interest in maintaining its historic buildings (look how Sandbach managed "The Old Hall" for years) and even less in maintaining its historic churches.

Once the roof is watertight in the next few years, perhaps it is the time to begin to think to the future. Easy access, toilet facilities, comfortable seating, sustainable heating, more varied uses of the building outside worship times are the obvious areas of change that might be discussed. As it is at the moment, I fear St Mary's may easily drift gently into terminal decline - becoming an interesting waterproof pile on the hill that a very very few people visit. Those that do will be the purveyors of aspic, the architectural and historical curious and those after an atmospheric and moody picturesque photographic opportunity. When all is said and done, it is a sad truth that casual visitors 'doing' heritage make a lot of noise about preservation and no contribution to the finances of the church for the future. Incidentally neither did the production team of "Come Dine with Me" when they used the graveyard a year ago as a backdrop to some peculiar antics from the diva of "Most Haunted" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nBLFBrMvKoU>)

## 5 CONCLUSION

And yet...and yet...

People in moments of crisis or in great perturbation of spirit drop in on the off-chance to talk quietly and put themselves before God. So above all the main Vision of the future for St Mary, Sandbach has to be what it always has been at heart, a faithful witness of the love and purposes of God. We are to be faithful in prayer for all who live and work in Sandbach and the wider world.

In the third year as vicar, I'm acutely aware of the many things that I have failed to do that I would have hoped to. Often failing to do small and routine and trivial duties occasions the greatest sense of guilt. However I'm also aware that it has been a most fruitful time as well. There is a sense of urgency and adventure about the parish that I was not aware of when I started. I am very conscious of what has been

achieved, and even more conscious of work still to be done. I am deeply grateful to God for the opportunity of serving Him and his people in this place.

Thomas Shepherd

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