



St NICOLAS' CHURCH
ABINGDON-ON-THAMES

**Team Vicar's Address
to
The Annual District Church Meeting
Monday 28 March 2019**

I would like to pose a question as we close tonight. And, the question is this:

'What kind of church do we want to be'?

There are many answers of course. I propose to offer just a few as we pray for the Spirit who brought the church to birth at Pentecost, to enliven us with power from on high, in the coming year.

You will recall the account of the Day of Pentecost – the violent rushing wind, the tongues of flame, all being filled with the Spirit. (Acts 2.1-4). Peter preached in such a way that many came to be baptized in response to his message 'and that day about three thousand persons were added'. (Acts 2.41). Then we hear how these new believers began to live. It was a new and simple lifestyle, but it was challenging:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need. Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people. And day by day the Lord added to their number those who were being saved. (Acts 2.42-47)

'What kind of church do we want to be?'

I wonder if we can be a church like that? Perhaps we are already? We come together week by week; we hear the teaching of the church and the preaching of the word; we break bread; and we pray together. We give what we have for the common good of this community of faith, and for those within our community who are in particular need.

We are a church in this parish who has been rightly recognized at last summer's PCC Away Day for our distinct identity. We are open each day of the week and the ministry of welcome and hospitality which we offer is clearly what we bring to this town and parish. If we want to be a church like the Acts of the Apostles then we need to faithfully continue in this ministry and be constantly open to what needs we can meet, both reliably and realistically. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I am confident we can achieve this.

'What kind of church do we want to be?'

We want to be a church that *grows*. Growth is high on the Agenda of the Church of England because national decline is something which concerns ordained and lay people alike. It causes sleepless nights. But, growth begins with ourselves, our parish, and then numbers. As our Diocesan Synod has reminded us, it is about being a 'mixed-economy church', doing different things to meet the needs of different people. It might involve us thinking differently therefore and being courageous and open to change.

The current Bishop of Hertford, Bishop Michael Beasley, has said that to grow a congregation by 10% each year is what we should aim for. In our small community, during the last year, we have seen new people coming, and staying, and that must continue. Our witness to living the good news needs to attract people to the Risen Christ, by our welcome, by how they see our own lives changed and how we relate to each other in love and unity.

I have gained inspiration from Bishop Paul Bayes, Bishop of Liverpool, in his most recent book *The Table: Knowing Jesus: Prayer, Friendship, Justice*. In it, he includes these words from his inaugural sermon in November 2014:

'.....this is my vision of the church of Jesus Christ: a mixed group of ordinary people with the most extraordinary gift to share. And because the gift is so marvelous, that's why I want

the church to grow. Not so that we can (simply) have a bigger church, but so that we can make a bigger difference'. p3

I want to thank those who have worked so hard during the past year – especially my Wardens Paul and Andrew – and for their willingness to stand again. I want to thank each and every one of you for your contributions to the ongoing work and mission of this church. It is too easy for church to be another place where we volunteer and do too much. Instead, we should be the place where we can at least *aim* to get the balance right between *being* and *doing*.

'What kind of church do we want to be?'

There are many answers and I hope you will be able to share yours with me in the coming weeks. I encourage you to do so. Bishop Paul's words go a long way to answer the question, as do those recorded by Luke in Acts:

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers (Acts 2.42)

The Revd Paul Smith, Team Vicar, 18 March 2019