

Team Vicar's Report for St Nicolas' Annual Report 2020

In preparing for Annual Meetings I didn't anticipate that at the time of writing we would be in our third Lockdown as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. The ongoing situation, not least through the winter, has caused considerable challenges and impact on our common life as it is has across the whole diocese, Church of England, and the world. We do, however, continue to look for signs of hope in our midst, especially with the roll-out of the vaccine programme.

2020 began in the normal way until we were plunged into the first National Lockdown in March. The Government decision to close churches nationally had a profound effect on people. As a parish, services were effectively recorded from St Helen's each week, and placed on their website, as a means to provide spiritual nourishment for all. All members of the clergy team, including some of our honorary assistants, participated in this ministry. This does not underestimate, of course, the deprivation of meeting together in person on a weekly basis to share in worship and fellowship together. Everyone felt this keenly and I certainly shared in that sense of pain. In addition to the parish's worship provision, the diocese provided Church at Home where a member of the senior staff – usually one of our bishops – would preside from their home. I know that this facility was appreciated by several.

It was very hard that the Festival of Easter could not be celebrated in our church or across the parish. The fact that we were blessed with an extraordinary warm Spring made a difference. Many of us would have spent Easter Day in the garden. It brought to mind those liminal places where Jesus appeared after his resurrection, and particularly, of course, outside the tomb with Mary Magdalene.

The Lockdown took us through to the summer when we were able to open the churches in the parish for private prayer. St Nic's was the first of the three churches in the parish who tried this venture and I am grateful to Andrew Coker and Paul Rast-Lindsell, our Wardens, for enabling this. A large amount of preparation was required administratively with the completion of risk assessments required by the Church of England issued through the diocese. Thorough cleaning was required; as well as ensuring that pews and seating were appropriately distanced; and those visiting were aware of, and adhered to, the regulations required. Our Wardens were present in the church to welcome and support those visiting for prayer and we had both visitors and people from our own congregations.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the huge contribution made to our church by Jim Barker, who had been our Verger for many years. Jim both opened our church, welcomed visitors both locally and those visiting Abingdon as tourists, and made a lot of friends and contacts during his time with us. Jim retired from his post in September. Due to the restrictions imposed upon us, it has not been possible to have a formal Farewell to Jim. However, at the time of writing, we are currently finding a time when he can be invited to Sunday worship for the presentation of a gift in thanks for all his dedicated service.

It was a great sadness that, after re-opening our building for private prayer and then later for Sunday worship, that a second, albeit shorter Lockdown, was enforced from 5 November which meant that once again worship was suspended. There was speculation as to whether churches would re-open for Christmas, not least as the Government imposed a tiered-system which was applicable to the number of infection rates depending on where one lived. Thankfully, in the end, there was a relaxation in time for Christmas – and although it was a very different Christmas in terms of meeting with family and friends, we were able to meet for worship. I had a period of sick-leave following hospitalisation in October, and therefore in my absence, our Wardens met with Canon Charles Mashedor to discuss arrangements for Christmas services. It was clear that care needed to be taken in what was offered. It was agreed was agreed at that meeting to have a Christmas Carol Service and a service on Christmas Morning only. The Service of Christmas Carols and Readings was quite different, of course, with the limiting of numbers and requirement for booking and no congregational singing. Nevertheless, we were able to enjoy a service ‘with a difference’ where we were treated to recorded music from some distinguished choirs. I am grateful to Andrew Coker and Eluned Hallas for working closely with me on this service and for those who read on that occasion.

The opportunities for meeting over Zoom for fellowship during the difficult year was a source of support and blessing. We all owe a huge debt of gratitude to Eluned Hallas for setting up a Zoom account for St Nic’s and enabling us to meet in this way. My thanks go also to Nick Hallas for his additional support.

As I have mentioned already, there are signs of real hope with the vaccination programme across our nation, as one of the key ways through this pandemic. However, life has changed significantly and we have suffered losses in what was

our 'normal life'. At the same time we have seen great blessing in what we have appreciated in new and fresh ways.

And yet, we do not know what the future holds – even in the short term. As we move forward it must be with a sense of gentleness on the earth, with love and patience towards each other, acknowledging that everyone has had a different experience of these very difficult times. Recovering will take time, and that is something that must both be emphasised and of which we shall need to remind ourselves constantly as time unfolds.

Whatever the future, we must hold on to the hope which is at the heart of our Christian faith and therefore central to the life of the church. That hope is of course rooted in the Risen Christ, who speaks hope and peace at Easter, and calls us to new life in him.

My thanks and deep appreciation comes to all of you for what you have done in the past year in these extraordinary circumstances, and in whatever way, and for all you will continue to do.

With every blessing and prayer for all that lay ahead, knowing that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Fr Paul

31 March 2021