

Vision, mission, progress, change

Sermon by Chris Bessant

24 April 2016

10am Holy Communion

Exploring John, chapter 13, verses 31-35

“When he was gone, Jesus said, ‘Now the Son of Man is glorified and God is glorified in him. If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.

‘My children, I will be with you only a little longer. You will look for me, and just as I told the Jews, so I tell you now: where I am going, you cannot come.

‘A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.’ “

Thanks to All

Ok, today I'm going to start with an old joke:

Q: How many Vicars does it take to change a lightbulb?

A: None, because they get someone else to do it!

But therein lies the truth! How on Earth would I get on in this church without the help of others? I cannot play the organ, I cannot arrange the flowers, I cannot fix the church when it's broken, I cannot sing an anthem. I cannot be trusted near food because I tend to eat it before it gets to anyone else!

You might easily get the impression that because I stand here centrally each Sunday then I am somehow running the entire show. But please don't be fooled by my 'gift of my gab' because without being surrounded by such a great cloud of saints and witnesses I would not be able to function at all.

APCM Sunday always comes to me with a spring-in-the-step because today I have the opportunity to give thanks for the many good souls we have who make a fantastic contribution to the running of our parish, and all we do together in God's name. If you are not sure what I mean by APCM Sunday then it's 'Annual Parochial Church Meeting Sunday', or better described as a chance to hear about the activities of our church over the year gone by, and to consider the year to come. Later at midday there will be an agenda of committee type stuff, but most importantly is our sharing together at the table afterwards in thanks to each other.

Now to best give an account of all we have been doing over the last twelve months, and for the year to come I'm splitting it all down in to two areas: firstly, managerial, and secondly worshipful.

Churchwardens

Now when we talk about the management of the church we talk about our central governing body – the Parochial Church Council. There are about twenty in the team, and its work is to make major decisions about projects to care for our church buildings, about finance, about priorities, and to receive reports about how the life of the church is getting on. Although the PCC only meets about six times each year, its members will tell you about the weight of responsibility that it carries. The buck stops with the Council, and in these last twelve months it's had to address some pretty heavy issues.

The first one I would like to tell you about is financial. At the beginning of 2015 our Treasurer had to report that we were looking at a hole in our finances that would leave us perhaps £25,000 in the red, and with the same problem to come in subsequent years. Income had fallen and costs had risen, and so in 2015 we worked hard to address this unhappy balance with a Stewardship Campaign. Many of you will recall no doubt the letters and leaflets we sent out, and the events we organized. It was all done at a considerable scale, and many people put in much effort. **I'm very pleased to report on behalf of the PCC that our care and generosity was able to make a significant difference, not only in financial terms, but also to confirm in our community the depth of goodwill by which our churches are held.**

The PCC has also had to address many matters to do with our church buildings. 2015 was significant because it was the year for our five-yearly inspections to be carried out. This can be a rather dreaded time because the architect's report leaves you with a long list of things which need to be fixed, and therefore a long bill. In the end I would say that the reports were not as bad as they could have been, with most of the big ticket repairs being those that we already knew about. In the final balance we have about £250,000 of work to do to address all of the issues and problems. The vast majority of that cost is attributed to the restoration work for both church towers.

Taking each separately, you will already be aware of the plan to replace the wooden exterior of St Saviour's tower and spire. That alone costs £92,000. In 2015 we made an application for £80,000 of government funds, but we were turned down mainly because hundreds of other churches were applying for the same limited pot of money. In February we made a second application – this time for £42,000 - which happily reflects our success in raising local funds. We won't hear the result until late June, so do please hold St Saviours in your prayers, because if we are

turned down a second time then there is no certain plan about what to do next.

Now turning to the issues that the PCC faces with the St Lawrence Tower. The challenge is not dissimilar to St Saviour, except that it's a problem with the stone rather than the wood. In very basic terms the stonework is carrying too much moisture because it's getting trapped within. The reason for this is because the pointing between the stones is not allowing the tower to 'breathe out' it's moisture because the surface mortar is of the wrong type. Since perhaps the 1940s this has been a progressive effect which is now leading to damp problems on the inside of the tower and disintegration of some of the stonework. The task therefore is to chip out the surface mortar and repoint new mortar in its place. For the builders It's a slow and painstaking job which will see scaffolding surrounding the tower for around four months. Just this last week a new project team has been formed to look into fundraising some £150,000, and I can guarantee that you shall be hearing more about it once a fundraising plan is in place.

My thanks indeed to the whole PCC, and the Fabric Team, for all their hard work over the last twelve months.

Parish Administrator

The last thing I would like to mention before I move onto the worshipful side of my report is the matter of setting up a new Parish Office and employing a Parish Administrator. Our plan is that from July we shall have an administrator in place in the new office. Since arriving three years ago I have found that a very great deal of my day has had to be spent on regular and repetitive tasks that make poor use of my time. I also have to expend much effort supporting others carrying out their admin tasks. Almost all other parishes have long since recognized that this is not a good use of their clergy and have put a parish administrator in place.

In conjunction with the Parish Secretary and the churchwardens we have drawn up a job description and invited applications for eventual interview in early May. I'm pleased that we have so far had seven applications, and I shall have more news to share with you in due course.

I'd now like to move onto the worshipful side of my report to you, by which I mean all things done in a gathered and spiritual way, such as our Sunday services, baptisms, weddings and funerals.

Occasional Offices

I have always found it intriguing that even though we hear constantly of the decline of the church, yet the demand for our services is constantly increasing. Looking at our present and past records, there is a clear rise in the number of baptisms weddings and funerals that we provide. In particular, there was a very marked increase for funerals in church in 2015. Normally Chris Bedford and I would expect to see the majority of funerals at the crematorium, but in fact most have asked to be here at St Lawrence. Long may that continue.

We usually have between 40-50 funerals each year, 20 or so weddings, and 30 baptisms, which are very good numbers for a parish of our size. It seems that people still naturally look to the church at these times in their lives. **Perhaps the downside is that many ministers have been finding that people look to the church as a facility when they need it, rather than a commitment for life. Chobham is no exception in that regard.**

Tea Service

Moving on now to thing related to children and family's ministries I've been able to report in recent years that we have seen constant growth in attendance to the afternoon Tea Service, and happily 2015 was no

different. Each 2nd and 4th Sunday afternoon we have an average of 20 – 25 children with their parents, so with helpers included it tends to be a congregation usually in excess of fifty, which is very healthy.

Furthermore, the parents of the Tea Service planning group are now starting to take on the work of running the services themselves and without my input. These same parents, and two of the mums in particular, last year took over the running of the Thursday morning Parents and Toddlers groups. Once again it's nice to be able to report that the Thursday morning group is also thriving – to the point that they are worried about how they are going to be able to fit any more in!

Service Timings

I'd like now to say a word or two about the timings of our Sunday morning services, and those of you who have read my report will already be aware that there is to be review later on this year, and changes for 2017. Our every-Sunday pattern of 8:00am, 9:00am and 10:00am services is causing difficulties. It's long been known that the most useful tool we have for engaging people and helping them to settle into regular worship is by talking to them, building relationships, and visiting them. I'm afraid the current Sunday morning pattern makes that very difficult indeed and I am certain that it is holding us back in growth terms. Quite simply I never seem to have much time to talk to people on a Sunday morning, because I'm always rushing about. That's bad news for the mission of the church.

In the autumn I will work with Chris Bedford and the Churchwardens to suggest one or more alternative timing patterns, which I expect will look closely at the regularity and timing of the 8:00am and 9:00am services. The PCC will discuss the matter in a September-November timeframe, and with a view to implementing a new pattern in 2017. For some this will mean unwanted change, but then we must remember that as Christians our relationship is with Christ first and foremost, and we ought not to be constrained to a particular building or time of day.

Thy Kingdom Come

Finally, I would like to introduce you to a new idea which has come down from the Archbishops of Canterbury and York, which is a week of prayer proceeding under the title 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done'. Being an archbishop's initiative it's aimed at the thousands of parishes which make up the whole Church of England. From 8th – 15th of May the intention is to pray that God will bring his present and transformative effect into the people and institutions of our country. It's about taking that which is familiar – The Lord's Prayer – and praying that it will be active in a land which so desperately needs it. Although this is a national initiative, it's up to the parishes to determine how it's set up in the local context. When you came into church this morning you will have received a sheet which sets out a series of events and dates for us here in Chobham. Do please take this home with you and use it to plan your own response and attendance. I shall have more to share with you on Sunday 8th May.

Ending

It now remains only to gather in all our grateful hearts for the work of all who work so hard to serve Almighty God in our churches of St Saviour and St Lawrence. Do please take time to have a read through the report booklet, and share my own thanks for all who serve Christ here amongst us.

Amen