

Rector's Report 2024

Considering I've only been in post here for a little over a year, in the best possible way, it feels much longer! As a family, we have settled in well to life in the parish and I am greatly enjoying the gift and the challenge of serving God and the community in this place. I continue to be grateful for the various ways that people serve alongside me here as we gradually discern together where God is at work in this parish and people's lives, and how he calls us to join in, trusting that he will equip us as we go. Although the work of so many people, ranging from those who clean the church to those to clean the belltowers, deserves mention I need to make a special thankyou here for the work of John Richards as Churchwarden of Eccleston and Andrew Wilkinson as Secretary and PCC member. The role of posts such as the churchwarden and the secretary are vital yet often unnoticed – unless they aren't being done anymore! This year John formally steps back from his many years of invaluable work as a churchwarden and so as a PCC we wanted mark that and show our gratitude. As far as possible, John's experience and wisdom will still be put to good use as a reliable and knowledgeable person to draw from as we journey on together, though. Andrew will also step back from PCC duties as he prepares to move to pastures new. Again, we want to thank him for his contributions to the life and work of God's kingdom in this place.

As I have been prayerfully reflecting on where we've been and where we might be going in the future as we attend to the call of God, several things have struck me. Last summer the PCC met to discuss what next, and several ideas emerged from that, rooted in the aim of helping one another to know Christ better whilst also making Christ known to the communities in which we live and serve. Since then, in amongst experiencing my firsts here – Harvest, Remembrance, Advent, and Christmas – we have produced a feedback form to gain your insights on the ideas we have generated as a PCC. The first thing I note, not just from reflecting on PCC discussions and feedback forms but from more general reflection is that the parish church in the UK does not hold the place in the community it once did, and acceptance of this should inform how we 'do' church. Throughout the Scriptures God has a habit of drawing people out of old ways and places in order to see afresh what God is doing – be that Egypt, Exile, or John the Baptist calling people out into the wilderness to prepare them for the coming of Jesus. That is not to say everything is left behind – we have to carefully sift what is good and useful from our history and traditions and what is not and discard that which is no longer useful and prevents us from moving forward with God. Tradition for tradition's sake is the death knell of any community but particularly the church. But God doesn't just call his people out of old and outdated ways, he also equips them for what is next and sends them – not always in that order!

So, the second thing that has struck me is how he might be equipping us. A firm favourite on the feedback form is gathering – either for socials such as a Harvest Lunch or for Coffee after a service – which is heartening as it seems to show a desire to be together and strengthen our community fabric! Alongside that is an interest in gathering with the intent of deepening our faith through such things as study groups and silent church.

Thirdly, as we turn outwards, we continue with a revamped version of Messy Church focusing on engaging with various ages in interactive ways alongside building on school

relationships. We may also think more about how we might support other partners in their work as well as how we might build stronger relationships with our wider community through things like coffee mornings.

As has already been noted, in the finance report, we are running at a loss. We can't ignore that point and hope it will go away as we try and maintain beautiful but often not very versatile or helpful buildings! Yet, we also can't slip into the trap of being so focused on fundraising that we lose focus on prayerfully being attentive to God's call. Yes, we all need to consider how we use the money *and gifts* that God has given us and yes, we need to encourage others in suitable ways to support God's work in this parish but we need to remember that financial stability is not an end goal but a means to serving God well in this place. Maintenance for maintenance's sake, like tradition for tradition's sake sounds the death knell of the church.

So, yes, let's be realistic about the challenges that lie ahead, but let's also remember that this is God's mission to the world and that we are called simply to be attentive and faithful to what God calls us to do and trust God for the rest. As we do so, let's give thanks for people, for history, for traditions, and for opportunities as we step forward in faith together following God's call, trusting him to equip us with all we need, and using what he gives us wisely for his purposes.