

RECTOR'S LETTER, AUGUST 2018

I'm writing this on the eve of my holiday, which will be followed in very short order by my two months of Study Leave. I will see you all on September 2nd, when I take the services at both 8 am and 10 am – and then, I shall disappear! Well not literally: I shall be staying in the Rectory for most of the time during September and October, working on the papers of my old teacher and former Bishop of Ely, Stephen Sykes, so inevitably we shall see each other around the village. (I don't intend to 'nip' to Abington every time I need a bottle of milk!) I'll be pleased to see people, and say 'hello', but will be grateful if you don't ply me with news or questions about parish affairs during that period. Mentally, I'm supposed to leave all that behind as I take a 'sabbatical break'. Please also explain this to other people who may need to know, but may not have read this letter.

If you need to contact a member of the clergy team, please be in touch with Nicola Bown in the first instance (tel: 977164). Lesley Gore and Ian Fisher will also be around to help out. And the churchwardens will be available to answer questions or address concerns. I am very lucky to have such a competent team of colleagues, so I can take this break with full confidence and an easy mind.

During my absence, there will be a change in the pattern of our services at St Mary's – a change which we have been planning for some time. In May the PCC voted that on the fourth Sunday of each month the 10 am service should be a non-Eucharistic celebration for all ages together, but with the offer of a quiet Eucharist at 5 pm on that Sunday for those who would miss their communion, but can't make it for 8am. Other services will remain as before – 8 am Prayerbook Communion every Sunday, Parish Eucharists at 10 am on the first, third and fifth Sundays, and an All Age Eucharist (but now with more participation by young people as acolytes, readers, etc.) on the second Sunday of the month. The PCC agreed that this changed order should be an experiment for 6 months, to be reviewed in March next year.

We hope that by having two explicitly 'All Age' services each month, we will make Sunday morning churchgoing a bit easier for families with children, and that by having one of them not as a Eucharist, we will give ourselves more time to do some of the interactive forms of presentation and prayer, which we have previously enjoyed at All Age Eucharist up to now, but which sometimes made those Eucharists rather long. It will also give our gifted lay ministers more scope for planning and leading the worship.

We are calling the fourth Sunday service *Together with God*, and I want to stress that both parts of that title have important meaning. To take the last two words first, the worship will be very much about focussing on God – not on any single age group and its concerns. It is intended to be spiritually uplifting for everyone. And, turning to the first word of the title, we really do want it to be *together*, which means it needs you! Some people have expressed anxieties that St Mary's people who are used to going to the Eucharist may not wish to go to a service that is non-Eucharistic, and stay away. Let's prove those anxieties unnecessary! We want families with children, and those who are maybe a bit more on the fringe of church life, to feel that they are being warmly welcomed by a substantial community of all ages. Having a good number present is what will help to make this true.

I recently read an article by a student who compared the life of the church to people's experience of social media: he said that so many people use Facebook because they have the feeling that 'everybody's there'. A critical mass of numbers leads to further growth. Church life on a Sunday morning should give off that message too – worshipping God together is the place to be. Many of us may underestimate how much our individual presence or absence is a witness, or counter-witness, to the importance of God and the truth of the Gospel. When we come together, we show people who pass by, or drop into 'put a toe in the water', that the life of faith matters and is really worth living. When we stay away, perhaps because we think this or that aspect of the service isn't our personal preference, we give the impression that Christianity is unimportant, like a retail outlet that isn't matching up to customer demands. Of course that's not what we believe or want to project. Those of us who have been trying to be faithful disciples for some time know that faith isn't about being religious consumers, but about being the body of Christ together, looking to each other's interests, and doing our best to invite and encourage other people onto the way of discipleship.

Together with God will be recognisably Anglican and over the next three months it will take three wonderful celebratory themes which are deeply part of our tradition as its focus: Harvest Thanksgiving, on September 23rd (to be followed by the Harvest Lunch); All Saints on October 28th, and the light of Christ, in a Christingle service on December 23rd.

When I return to parish life in Linton on November 4th, I would love to hear that the first two *Together with God* services lived up to their name, and that people felt richly blessed by God as they worshipped together in this new way, and that the leaders felt encouraged by your prayerful participation and support. Meanwhile, I shall be worshipping on Sundays in neighbouring parishes (and dioceses), chiefly, I expect, in Haverhill and the Saffron Walden team of churches. I look forward to the refreshment of seeing how other churches do things, and of being virtually unknown – a kind of 'mystery worshipper'. Who knows what I may learn.

With my love and prayers,

Maggie.