

Reflections from the Reverend Benjamin Edwards

This year we have looked to the future of our benefice, especially at the aspects of focusing on engaging with younger people in our connections with schools and All Age Worship offerings. We have also begun to revitalise our pastoral care, setting up a Pastoral Team. We look to build on this in the year ahead, including setting a regular pattern of All Age services, as well as settling the pastoral team into a good rhythm of working.

There are many positives that have come out of the past year, even though it had difficult patches. I continue to be enthused by the fellowship after services, which is always something to look forward to after our worship. It generates real joy which, as we know, is catching. Positivity shows through in our welcome and our invitation to others into the life of Holy Innocents and we are beginning to see people test the water, coming to services over Easter. We can most certainly build upon this in the years ahead as we look to extend our welcome wider.

Good foundations continue to be built this past year and it will be good to discern a path as we build on those foundations. We remember that underpinning all that we do for the Kingdom of God is our prayer, our communication with God, the encouragement and wisdom we receive from Scripture and the nourishment we receive in the Eucharist. This is how God equips us for the mission ahead – to bring Good News to all people, that Jesus Christ was amongst us, died for us, rose from the dead in the Resurrection and is with us now. Deepening our knowledge and understanding of the faith will enable us to be better equipped for that mission as we look to feed and water what we have grown.

Worship

We have maintained our pattern of worship for the most part this past year, with Sung Eucharist, Holy Communion and Evensong, as well as Holy Communion from the Book of Common Prayer. New service booklets have been produced for BCP Holy Communion and Evensong, to not only help those for whom the print in our BCPs is hard to read, but also for those who may chance upon these services to be able to easily engage and participate in them – there are large print versions available.

All Age services have started to become an established part of our service pattern – a simple Eucharistic service for everyone.

There will also be lay led services, by our Reader Kathy Drakes or others who are permitted to do so, with occasional Songs of Praise, Service of the Word and Evensong services. This not only gives the vicar a little breathing space and a chance to hear others preach, but also to build upon an emphasis that we are a church that shares our ministry amongst us where it is possible to do so.

We will be looking at forming a servers rota, so that others who desire to assist in our church services will have the opportunity to serve, particularly at Eucharist.

Christmas services were well attended across the benefice, particularly good feedback was given to me following the Crib Services we held, with really good engagement from Great Barton families, school families and other residents who consider the service “part of our Christmas”. It is always really great to welcome the wider families of our congregation too.

Easter services continue to be a mixed bag – our Palm Sunday Together Church service at St Peter’s was well attended and great fun, but slightly less folk engage with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday offerings. There may be a variety of reasons for this. I am keen to emphasize the importance of travelling with Jesus during Holy Week, through the joys and pain and despairs and sorrows, right through to the amazement and elation of the Resurrection. In Philippians 3:10-11 we hear Paul cry out. "I wish to know Christ and the power flowing from his resurrection likewise to know how to share in his suffering, by being formed into the pattern of his death. Thus do I hope that I may arrive at the resurrection from the dead."

For us to enter into the life, death and Resurrection of Christ, we must all take part in that journey! Perhaps we can encourage each other to enter into that journey together – some thought must go into perhaps an earlier Maundy Thursday service and a benefice Good Friday offering to make this even easier for people to engage in.

Finally, mention must go to not only our church wardens for their hard work in ensuring worship happens, but also our Reader Kathy Drakes, whose excellent preaching and insightful teaching has been invaluable not only to the congregations but also to me personally; not only to assist me but also to inspire me! Our retired clergy Reverend David Crawley and Reverend Mark Hunt, who have once again made themselves available for various worship and occasional office duties also deserve a thanks, as well as Rev’d Sharon Connell taking our Midnight Mass service. We look forward this year to The Rev Canon Stephne van der Toorn ministering to us, joining those excellent retired priests in their ministry to the benefice.

Ministry & Mission

Our ministry to the wider community continues to be consistent, especially when it comes to our focus on young people and the older generation who are served by Meeting Point. We are looking forward to building on the success of Meeting Point, and hope to engage parents and carers of children at Great Barton Primary, with a ‘Pitstop’ style tea and toast morning meet up. This is yet to materialise but we hope to see this arrive this year.

We also look forward to making plans to freshen up the Children’s Corner – we do sometimes have visitors to this section of our church, so some new resources here would be welcomed.

Engagement with schools has been excellent – I attend Great Barton Primary every week to deliver assemblies, and our Reader for the Benefice Kathy Drakes has also begun a ministry here.

I was also invited into the SENDAT Special Education school (Priory & Aspire) in Thurston to lead sessions about the major Christian festivals, which both the pupils and I thoroughly enjoyed; the pupils were full of questions and fun. I shall be working with their RE lead teacher to continue building a relationship between the school and the benefice, as the school supports children from a wide area of West Suffolk.

I also have become the Chaplain (or Padré) to the 863rd RAF Air Cadets in Thurston, leading various sessions on a Thursday Evening, including ethics, meditation and teamwork (building a tower out of spaghetti and marshmallows!), and am settling in to becoming part of the team there. Whilst not necessarily Great Barton-specific, it is good to have that connection with the benefice.

Vicar visits have been a particular joy – I have been dedicating more time to visiting congregation members and others in the parish, and have been bowled over by the warmth and welcome by many. I am keen for this to become a mainstay of my ministry here. We shall look to our small pastoral team, who can assist in discerning when a vicar visit might be desired as well as provide a contact with the church and a listening ear. Currently the team consists of Linda Scoles, Kathy Drakes, Molly Lumley and myself.

These are all areas upon which we will continue to focus on and build on the foundations we have established. So much has become eroded with the years of pandemic, but we are beginning to see not just green shoots but young plants for us to tend to and care for as best we can.

Endings, beginnings and thanks

Firstly, I wish to thank wholeheartedly our church wardens for their continued hard work this year – your experience has been invaluable. I am pleased that our church wardens are happy to continue in their roles – good news for the whole church.

As a member of the Inclusive Church national family of churches – an organisation that helps signpost folk who may not find a welcome elsewhere to our churches, especially LGBT+ folk, differently abled, from any racial heritage, neurodiverse etc, we deliberated as to whether to offer the Prayers of Love and Faith – a suite of liturgies to affirm same sex relationships as part of our regular worship patterns (when requested), which we decided as separate churches. Both St Peter's and Holy Innocents made the decision to offer these services to our parishes, further cementing our welcome of people who identify as LGBT+.

Whilst we do not necessarily expect a stampede of folk looking to take up this offer, it is a further message to the rest of the communities in our parishes that we are a welcoming and inclusive church that wants to draw all people to God's love. I am very proud of both our churches for the time and deliberation they took, both at PCC and congregational level, to consider this, and also for the

compassionate and Christ-like responses I received from many. It may not be a roaring fire of change in our parishes, but it is a spark – and it may only take a spark to light a flame that others can see God's love by.

I'd like to offer another huge thanks again goes to Peter Robinson for his support and assistance. Thank you Peter for all that you do to support both churches and my ministry.

This past year saw the licensing of our Reader Kathy Drakes, a woman of much holiness who is now blessing us with her insights in teaching and preaching, as well as her pastoral excellence. I know that we all have gained much from being ministered to by Kathy, and I pray that her ministry here will go from strength to strength. Kathy led the Remembrance service in 2023, and reports were that she did a wonderful job of leading the community in that time of solemnity.

We sadly said goodbye to a wonderful Mother's Union leader, champion bellringer and committed Christian woman in Jill Rood, who died this year. Jill had been unwell for some time, but never let this dampen her passion for life or for the Mother's Union – she ensured that things would carry on after she left us, and was truly inspiring; a model of how to face our final journey with dignity, peace and love. Thank you Jill for all that you gave to our community, both St Peter's and Thurston. The number of people who came to send you off at your funeral service a testament to all the lives that you touched.

Final Note

There has been a season of steadiness in the missional life of Holy Innocents and hope for the future of the benefice this year. Holy Innocents is a welcoming place, however we must not fall into complacency! We look to becoming more inviting a church in the years ahead, growing in confidence as we grow deeper in faith. There is a sense that the ground is improving and becoming more fertile week by week, thanks to all the efforts of our church members. This parish has a church that increasingly is reaching out to it, and I would love to see this reaching out widen in its embrace. Those voices of invitation are beginning to be heard, the identity of this church is becoming clearer to those around us. I truly believe that God will burst forth from this congregation into the community around it, that we can radiate the new found joy we find in Jesus Christ's presence with us – and who doesn't want to be part of that joy? Let us focus on all that gives joy in our church community and lift it for all to see, the glory of God shining through the darkness. Christ, be our light!

Amen