

Sunnyside APCM 2022

Vicar's report: Looking forward

Since before I arrived, nearly five years ago, Sunnyside has been talking about pruning. Whilst there was widespread agreement that it was important to find ways of being less busy as a church, it was not clear to us as a church community what should be pruned. One of the things that the pandemic and lockdowns have done is give us a heavy pruning which has affected all aspects of our church life in some way or another. Whilst this has been extremely painful, it has given us a great opportunity to look afresh at what God is calling us to be and do as a church.

I am not a great gardener, but I do know that the whole reason we prune is so that things can grow more healthily and bear more fruit. Sometimes that means cutting off parts of the plant that are no longer flourishing and sometimes – and more painfully – it means pruning things that are healthy so that they may grow back more strongly and fruitfully. That is the process which Jesus describes in the passage from John 15 about abiding in the vine which we have often returned to as a church.

In the spirit of this, the PCC and leadership team are thinking carefully about each thing we have done in Sunnyside, whether or not it should restart and if so in what form. We have been focusing on how each activity might help us love, grow and serve, and how it might do so, often in a simpler way than we did before. All our decisions on have been influenced by the findings of The Listening Project which helped us take the pulse of our parish and see what our community's major concerns are. They have also taken into account whether we have the resources, particularly in terms of team to offer the activity in a sustainable way.

As a result of this, it has been a joy to see Messy Babies grow and flourish. I wish to pay tribute to Sharon for her vision for Messy Babies and to the team who are enabling it to be a reality. It is clearly meeting a need for a safe space for babies and those who look after them, most of whom are not currently engaged in church in any other way, here or elsewhere. It has also been wonderful to see Lunch Club return in its new monthly format and to welcome the Rural Trust and older people back to Songs of Praise with their new and simpler tea.

In order to help us going forward, the PCC has set some priorities which will help us focus our attention and resources going forward. The PCC has also accepted some recommendations of practical ways in which we might make these priorities a reality.

The PCC has set these priorities for the coming months:

1. Worship: growing as worshipping people in church and in life
2. Discipleship: growing as followers of Jesus in who we are and what we do
3. Mission: sharing Jesus with people through relationships

I want to spend a little time talking about each of these.

1. Worship: growing as worshipping people in church and in life

Our prime calling as people who are seeking to follow Jesus is to worship him. As we explored in our sermon series during Lent, our worship will be both bowing down before him in praise, adoration and repentance, and also serving him in all aspects of our lives. We are called to worship God in church on Sundays and at other times - and it is vital that we do gather together regularly to do this – but also in all we do outside church: in our work and in our play; in how we relate to other people and how we care for God’s world. Online services have been a great blessing while we could not gather and will be continuing for those who cannot get to church, but we have discovered that they are a poor substitute for gathering in person. We are called to be worshippers, not spectators of the worship of others. However hard we try, watching online encourages a consumerist attitude in us that leads us to observe worship rather than participate in it. Just as family zooms and online quizzes have not made up for meeting together, so online services do not enable us to build relationships in the ways in which God intended for his Church. I would therefore really like to encourage you to return to in person worship if you have not already done so and rebuild the holy habit of attending church regularly for worship.

The PCC has recognized that our first priority is to grow in the area of worship and that this growth should be multidimensional. It should be about extending our worship so that worshipping God is something we do in all areas of life but also deepening our worship so that we worship God more fully. It is about us worshipping with all that we are: our hearts as well as our minds, our bodies as well as our lips.

Some of the ways in which we will seek to encourage growth in our worship are by investing in our worship team and rolling out some new technology which enables us to put together our services more easily.

2. Discipleship: growing as followers of Jesus in who we are and what we do

Growing in worship is just one of the ways in which we are invited to grow as disciples of Jesus so we may be the salt and light we are called to be.

My favourite definition of discipleship is ‘being with Jesus so we can learn from Jesus how to be more like Jesus’ (Dallas Willard). It reminds us that discipleship is about relationship and transformation and that both are lifelong projects. However long we have been following Jesus, whether it is a few days or 50 years, there is always more. We can come to know him more and more as our relationship with him grows and deepens. We can become more and more like him as we seek to live as he lived and did as he did. All of this takes time: time spent with Jesus. Time letting the Holy Spirit work in us. All of this means us learning to obey Jesus’ command to love as he loved us: sacrificially and wholeheartedly. All this means us taking up our cross daily as we seek to follow the way Jesus showed us in all our relationships and all our situations.

As followers of Jesus, we are his apprentices, learning from our master how to live as God intended. One of the best ways of doing this is by being part of a small group. Small groups come in many forms: house groups, connect groups, Lent groups, Advent groups, Prayer Triplets are just some. What they share are opportunities to gather with other people either long term or for a specific period of time, to learn from Jesus and one another how we might become more like Jesus. Longer term groups are a wonderful chance to build deep relationships with other members of the Sunnyside family as we study the Bible together, pray for one another and support one another in the joys and challenges of life.

If you are not currently part of a small group, I would like to actively encourage you to join one. They meet at different times and have different feels so there is something for everyone! The Discipleship Action Group have some plans to help encourage our small groups and to enable more people to be part of them. Please do speak to Rachel or me if you would like to find out more.

3. Mission: sharing Jesus with people through relationships

One of the negative consequences of the pandemic and Covid restrictions is that they have made us more inward looking. This has been sadly true of church life as it has for other areas of our lives. Whilst understandable given the unprecedented challenges of the past couple of years, it is not healthy in the long term. As followers of Jesus, we are called to look beyond ourselves and our needs. We are called to be the light of the world, sharing the love of Jesus with those we meet. As a Church of England parish church, we have a particular calling to serve those who live in our parish.

Relationships are at the heart of our faith: a relationship with God made possible by the death and resurrection of Jesus which then transforms our relationships with one another.

One of the real joys of Messy Babies is seeing the relationships that are being formed: relationships within the team who enable Messy Babies to happen; relationships between the babies and amongst who care for them; relationships between those who come and the church.

These relationships are of value in and of themselves, but they are also one of the best ways of fulfilling our calling to share our faith with others. Building genuine relationships of love and trust with other people will enable them to see the difference knowing Jesus makes to us and to ask about where God might be at work in their lives too. They will give us space to share our stories and God's story.

The Listening Project gave us insights into what concerns the community we are here to serve as the parish church of Sunnyside. I suspect that similar concerns are voiced by our friends, neighbours and colleagues. This understanding is helping us think about how we might build better relationships with them. Relationships which will help us see where Jesus is at work in our community so we may get involved with that. Relationships which will

enable others to see the difference that Jesus makes to our lives. Relationships which will help us be the light on the hill that we have been imagining in prayer and discussion.

The work I hope you have been noticing on the church grounds to help us create environments that are more welcoming to people and wildlife are one way in which we are seeking to build relationships by responding to the concerns of our community about climate change. A summer event in George Street Park is another which we hope will address the concern of isolation. This is of course importantly underpinned by the work of prayer: praying regularly for those who live and work in our parish from our homes or by walking the streets.

Conclusion

One of the recurring images we have had in the past year is of Sunnyside as a light on the hill. Jesus said:

‘You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5.14-16

We want to be known as a Christ-centred community of living faith which seeks to make Jesus known to others. Growing in our worship, discipleship and relationships will help us do this. However, above all we need to pray, for if our life as individuals and a church is not rooted and watered in prayer we will not grow, however much we seek to love and serve. We need to pray for our community: we need to pray that we will see what God is doing here; we need to pray for wisdom about how to serve what he is doing; and we need to pray for fruit from his work. Having prayed, we need to ask the Holy Spirit to enable us to love, grow and serve the Lord so that we might shine brightly for him and so his name may be glorified.