

Sunnyside APCM 2021

Give Thanks

I know that APCM's are not everyone's favourite event of the year at the best of times but I think even when held in circumstances where we cannot enjoy prosecco and cheese, they are a wonderful opportunity. Yes, there is some formal business we need to do so that we can ensure that we are properly constituted as an organisation but for me the annual meeting is essentially an opportunity to look back and give thanks for what God has done in the past year and look forward to what we think he might be going to do in the year ahead and that is exciting. Although there have been lots of challenges, we also have much to be grateful for. We also have much to be thankful for from 2020 which is the focus of this meeting if we can remember back that far!

Psalm of Lament

Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;
Lord, hear my voice.

Psalm 130.1-2a

Psalm of thanks

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.
His love endures for ever. (Psalm 136.1)

My thanks

We have a huge amount to be thankful for at Sunnyside. As we have seen already in the annual reports and our psalm of praise, God has been very gracious to us and shown us his goodness in many ways. I have much to be thankful for too. I continue to be thankful that God has called me to serve as your Vicar. I am thankful for the support and the care you show for me in so many ways; your love and kindnesses have certainly eased what has been a particularly hard year for me personally. I am thankful for all that you do to ensure that Sunnyside runs so efficiently and enable us to shine as God's light in this place. I am thankful for the ways in which I see God at work in your individual lives and in our communal life as we seek to follow him and serve our community.

I am not going to try to thank lots of people by name as I would need to name all of you because you all contribute in different ways and it would be awful if I missed someone out, but I do want to take this opportunity to thank Lesley, Richard and Fiona who are standing down from the PCC. We are hugely grateful to them for their willingness to have served Sunnyside on the PCC, for their time and their wisdom. I am also grateful for the work of the Action Groups and their chairs – Mark, Peter, Ian, Rachel Heath and Esther – who have enabled so much of the work of Sunnyside to continue despite Covid restrictions.

Last year we had the joy of Rachel and Hilary coming to Sunnyside to serve as curates here. We have been hugely blessed by their ministry to us and I am thankful for all that I learn from them about following Jesus and ordained ministry. I also wish to thank those who lead our services and preach to us. We are hugely blessed to have the gifts of the members of PALM (Preachers and Leaders Meeting) and I am grateful for their willingness to adapt to the different ways in which we have needed to lead and preach this year. I

would like to publicly thank John, Dick, Janet and Jane, Andrew and Pam, Sharon, Patrick, Rachael and Luke, and Richard, Hilary and Rachel. They hugely enrich us with their faithfulness and wisdom. Of course, behind the scenes there has been Tim and the tech team whose hard work has made my job so very much easier and whose knowledge and willingness to use their gifts to take our services online has enabled us to continue to worship together while we have been apart. Finally, I would like to thank the staff for their commitment and support through the past year. We were able to welcome Luke to Sunnyside as Youth Team Leader and Duncan as caretaker last year. It is such a joy – and relief – to have a full staff team - and I want to express my sincere thanks to them - to Luke, Duncan, Mel, Sharon, Patrick, and John for all that they do for us here at Sunnyside. Thank you.

Vicar's report: Looking forward

Thus far this evening, we have looked back at the past year and rightly named some of our sorrows and given thanks for what God has done for us, in us and through us as individuals and a church family. Now, I wish to look forward to the year ahead and what I believe God is calling us to focus on, which is of course building on the faithful work of past years.

When the PCC met for its away day in February – which being in lockdown was a two hour meeting on zoom – we reflected on some really helpful theory on disaster relief by Simon Barrington which is being drawn on by lots of churches to help understand and plan during the Covid-pandemic. Barrington says that there are three phases in a crisis:

1. Response

This is what we do to manage the immediate situation. For us at Sunnyside it has included online worship, zoom meetings, making our building Covid-secure and our pastoral network.

2. Recovery

This comes after the immediate crisis and is when we process what has happened. It cannot be rushed and is likely to be May/June of this year (so long as a major new variant does not change things). This sense of timings is reflected in the Prime Minister's steps to exit lockdown.

The recovery stage involves:

- remembering the ways that God has blessed us and been at work through the past year and giving thanks for his faithfulness and expressing our gratitude to those who have served and cared for us.
- reflecting on what all we have experienced through the pandemic (positive and negative), what we have learnt and what we might do differently moving forward.
- recuperating from the challenges and stresses of the restrictions of Covid. We need time to breathe and live life; the restrictions of Covid mean this is likely to include lots of meeting with people as we reconnect with those we have not been able to see and do the things that refresh us.

3. Reconstruction

This is when we rebuild and move forward in light of what we have learnt from our experiences of the crisis. It involves a reshaping of how we do things as we step into the new season of life at Sunnyside. My feeling is that this will really begin in the autumn, assuming that we continue with the current trajectory.

This evening I want to speak about the recovery and reconstruction phases and what they might look like for us at Sunnyside in light of the ingredients for a flourishing church which we looked at in our sermon series last year:

***They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship,
to the breaking of bread and to prayer. (Acts 2.42)***

The apostles' teaching

Sunnyside rightly puts a high priority on good teaching which is essential if we are to grow as followers of Jesus and seek to ensure that we remain faithful to him in who we are and what we do. It is also important as we go through the recovery and reconstruction phases as we want to be sure that what we are saying and planning is true to what the Bible teaches. We will therefore be having some sermon series to help us reflect on what we have experienced through the past year, where we have seen God in that experience, what God is wanting us to learn through it and what we might do differently as we move forward.

Fellowship

One of the things we have missed most about the past year has been seeing our family and friends. Not seeing our church family at Sunnyside, along with not being able to sing in church is the thing most mentioned by you when I ask what you are missing most. One of the huge blessings here is the strong relationships we enjoy with one another. Being able to spend time with one another – both people we have known for years and getting to know others – was one of the things we enjoyed most about our Weekend Away at High Leigh. It was one of the reasons we were keen to organise another weekend away but Covid means that it is postponed yet again and will now take place in September next year.

I am excited to say that part of the recovery process here at Sunnyside will be our Weekend Away at Sunnyside in July. The theme of the weekend is 'Being God's Family' which seems even more appropriate now than ever. Not only will we be able to learn from excellent teaching by Adrian Chatfield who will be with us, not only will our children and young people have their own programme, but we will have opportunities to spend time with one another, including two socials in the vicarage garden (with a marquee in case of bad weather!). We will be publishing further details about the Weekend Away at Sunnyside on our website and in the newsletter on Saturday. We really hope you will all come!

Breaking of bread

It is clear from Acts that the early followers of Jesus both broke bread as an act of Holy Communion and shared meals together as they invited one another into their homes. Holy Communion and hospitality are both things that have been badly affected by the restrictions of the past year.

Although we have been able to continue to worship together even when apart through our online services, it is not the same as gathering to worship God together in church and we have been unable to share communion. I am pleased that we have maintained similar numbers logging in as would have come to Sunnyside pre-Covid and that some new people have joined us. We will be continuing with our live stream service indefinitely and it is important that we do this. It is important for those who cannot physically come to church, it means that we can still worship with our church family when we are away, and it gives people an accessible way of trying Sunnyside out. However, we look forward to gradually welcoming more people into the church as restrictions lift so we can meet in person too. This is subject to government rules, but we hope will begin after the 17th May changes. Once we have a full in person congregation at 10.30, we will start having communion together again. Meanwhile, after the success of our outdoor Easter communion, we are going to have another on 23rd May to celebrate Pentecost.

I am also delighted to announce that in September we are planning to resume having a Sunday evening service which will be an opportunity to worship God and encounter him in a more relaxed service.

As restrictions lift, we will also be able to resume hospitality. Already we can start welcoming a few people into our gardens and I hope we are doing so. I would encourage all who are able to find safe ways of meeting up with those we know from church as we start rebuilding those relationships which are such a special feature of Sunnyside. Soon, God willing we will be able to share coffee and meals together at church too but not yet!

Prayer

Prayer is of course vital if we are to grow as individual followers of Jesus and as a church. As I mentioned in my message in the Annual Report, one of the areas in which Sunnyside has flourished during the past year has been prayer which is a real source of joy and thanksgiving. As we move forward, we need to continue to develop in this area: without all aspects of our lives and our church life being rooted in prayer, being grounded in spending time with God we cannot expect to thrive. It is essential if we are to be the flourishing church I know we all want to be.

As we move forward and life gets busier, we need to ensure that this aspect of our lives does not get forgotten. Zoom has been a great way of enabling more of us to join in with prayer meetings and we have got better at using it effectively. In the coming months we will explore how we move to a mix of prayer meetings – some in person and some online – so we can continue to be a praying church.

During May, I will be focussing on developing our prayer ministry team so that this important ministry can grow at Sunnyside. May will also see us taking part in Thy Kingdom Come when we will create opportunities for prayer in the churchyard using the great prayer posts and creating a prayer labyrinth which will be there for all those walking through our grounds to engage with like an outdoor prayer room.

Love God...Love one another

As we begin to meet together one again and move forward, it is good to be reminded of the new command that Jesus gave us:

***'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.'* (John 13.34-35)**

Loving one another includes recognizing that we are all different, with different responses and experiences. It includes recognizing that we are made richer by this difference and seeking to honour it in our life together. As we go through the recovery phase, it will be vital that we remember that although some elements of our experience of the past year will be similar, much will be different. This difference will be due to a combination of situation, events, commitments, and temperament. For some of us, the pandemic has given us more time and space so whilst we have struggled with the restrictions, we feel refreshed by the slower pace of life. For others, the stress of managing the different demands of family and work have left us exhausted and overwhelmed by the lack of time and space. For some of us, our predominant feelings have been frustration, while for others it has been extreme anxiety, and others have experienced a roller coaster of emotions. For some of us the past year has been a time of great growth in our faith and discipleship, for others our faith has been deeply challenged or faded. Of course, for most of us there has been a complete mixture of the above as the year has unfolded and brought various challenges and emotions. We have all lost things through the pandemic, some of which we will recover and some we will not find again. Some of us have also experienced the loss of bereavement and the additional

challenges of grieving with the restrictions preventing the funerals and family gatherings that would have brought us comfort. This is true of the church family and our wider community.

Remembering this difference and the command to love will also be essential as we move into rebuilding and reshaping church. We have been talking about pruning and being less busy since before I came to Sunnyside. Covid has dramatically pruned us and it would be a waste of the past year if we went straight back to what we did before. We need to carefully examine each activity and ask hard questions about whether it is still the best way to serve God and our community. If it is not, we should not restart it but ask God how we might meet that need in a more effective way or if it is an area of ministry we are to lay down. *The Listening Project* which is being developed by Hilary and the Mission Action Group will help us in identifying these needs within our church family and our wider parish as we ask 'what concerns you most?'. An example of where we have done this process of examination is in how we serve the youngest. It has been agreed after much prayerful thought and discussion that Smarties is no longer the best way of sharing God's love with tots and their carers so it will not be restarted. It has of course been a valuable activity in the past and we give thanks to God for all who have served through Smarties and come to it. However, an exciting new venture is due to begin in September: Messy Babies will build on the values and success of Messy Church to serve those little ones and their carers. In all these decisions we need to not only be covering the process in prayer but reflecting on the resources they need to run. The reality is that our resources, in terms of money but equally importantly in terms of people and time are finite. We cannot do things we cannot afford. We cannot start things where we do not have team to run them. This means it is vital that we are all asking God how he is calling us to serve. Even in the recovery phase, when most of us cannot think beyond daily life, seeing our family and holidays, we need to be asking how we are called to serve at Sunnyside or we will rebuild our lives with no time for serving. Serving God looks different for all of us and will look different at different times of our lives but is something we are all called to do.

'They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.' (Acts 2.42)

I have spoken about the four ingredients of a flourishing church and what they might look like in the coming months. I will speak more about 'they devoted' on Sunday but for now I want to close by reminding us of what these ingredients make. The consequence of the Holy Spirit's work through apostles' teaching, fellowship, breaking of bread and prayer in the early church was growth:

And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2.47)

I long for Sunnyside to grow: I want us to grow in spirit and in number. I want us to grow as individual followers of Jesus, to become ever more like Jesus with Jesus' love for God and our neighbour. I want us to grow as a church which is 'recognised as a Christ-centred community of living faith' as our vision puts it. I want this so that more people may know the joy of being loved by God. I want this so God may be glorified here even more. That is my prayer as we move into the recovery and reconstruction phases of the Covid pandemic. I look forward to seeing how God will work in us and through us and for us as we do.

Revd Rebecca Fardell
27th April 2021