

## Vicar's Talk at Sunnyside APCM 2024

### Give Thanks

I know that APCM's are not everyone's favourite event of the year, but I think 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 organization, 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 some challenges, we have much to be grateful for from 2023 which is the focus of this meeting.

### Psalm of thanks

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good.

**His love endures for ever.** (Psalm 136.1)

### My thanks

As we have seen in the annual reports and our psalm of praise, we have much to thank God for at Sunnyside. 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. I am thankful for all that you do to ensure that Sunnyside runs so well and enable us to shine be witnesses to Jesus 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 Penny Harrison who is stepping down from the PCC but is now chair of the Mission Action Group and Paul Craig who is taking on chairing GDI. We are hugely grateful to them for their willingness to serve Sunnyside in these roles, for their time and their wisdom. I would also publicly like to thank Tim and the tech team for their amazing work; Simon and his group who are looking at how to improve our buildings so that we can serve our community better (more about this later!) and to the staff. I am so grateful for all Sarah, Stephen, Chris and Neil contribute to our life at Sunnyside. I am also thankful to God for bringing Shirley to work in our office. Thank you!

### Vicar's report: Looking forward

When I was appointed as Vicar of Sunnyside and Bourne End, I asked God for some words from Scripture to be praying for us. I believe he gave me Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi:

And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1.9-11)

I have now been praying this for the past seven years: praying that we would grow in our knowledge and experience of God's love and therefore be empowered to be the salt and light we are called to be so that more people would glorify God. As I reflect on what God has been doing for us, in us and through us as a church, I can see how he has been answering this prayer.

This prayer contains the two elements that I have felt should be focusses for us: growing as followers of Jesus and strengthening our calling to share the love of God with others. These could be summarized as discipleship and mission which was why we created action groups to help us develop these areas of our church life. I am going to talk a little about these two areas and then Simon is going to tell us about exciting plans to help us make our buildings fit for the future so we might be better able to serve our community; I will then end with a few words about my forthcoming sabbatical.

Our vision statement as a church is: 'to be recognised as a Christ-centred community of living faith which seeks to make Jesus known to others'. At the heart of this is our commitment to making Jesus known to others through relationships which is only possible if we have Jesus at the centre of all we do and are growing as worshippers and disciples. Reflecting on our life at Sunnyside, we can see growth in our worship, which has been greatly supported by Stephen, and in our prayer. Worship is of course about all our lives and drives the things we do as individuals and as a church, but reflecting on our corporate worship, our services continue to recover from the effects of the pandemic, The Ten-Thirty is finding its identity afresh, and The Six offers more space to encounter God than is possible on a Sunday morning. There is of course still more to do: helping our families to engage with corporate worship and building the teams which enable our services to go smoothly are priorities we are seeking to address. Reflecting on prayer at Sunnyside which is vital for all we are and do, the response to our Lent focus on hearing God's voice was encouraging, and the Monday morning prayer meeting continues to flourish. However, the Saturday prayer breakfast and Prayer for Church meetings are less well supported, and we will be looking at how they might evolve going forwards.

As well as this growth in discipleship, we have been developing in our call to make Jesus known through our relationships with others. It has been really encouraging to see the deepening relationships with our mission partners as we pray for them regularly, particularly during our Monday prayer meeting. It has also been clear in our encounters with Sunnyside Rural Trust with whom we worked on the Eco Group's recent project to install bird boxes and a bug hotel in the churchyard. In addition, I am thankful for the progress we are making in building relationships with our parish, the community which as a Church of England church we have a particular call to serve. Through regular activities like Community Café and Messy Babies, and occasional events such as the Barn Dance earlier this year and the Fete we are planning for the summer, we are becoming better known

within our community and building relationships with our neighbours. I would like to particularly thank Katie Randall-Stratton and Penny Harrison for their enthusiasm and commitment to this work. There is still much to do through prayer and serving but just as the blossom is appearing on my apple trees, we can see the signs of future fruit here.

It is in this context of wishing to serve our community better and care more for God's world, both of which answer the three primary concerns expressed by our community in *The Listening Project* (climate, loneliness and mental health) that we have been exploring how we can improve our buildings so that they are fit for the future. Simon is going to speak about this now.

**Simon – fit for the future** (more information will be published about this soon)

Before we turn to questions, I want to say a few words about my sabbatical. From time to time, clergy are invited to apply for a sabbatical (or Extended Study Leave) to give them time for rest, refreshment and reflection. The intention is that this gives us time to recharge our spiritual, mental, emotional and physical batteries, and the space to reflect on aspects of our ministry and the life of the churches we serve in ways that are not possible when we are immersed in parish life. I am extremely grateful that the PCCs of Sunnyside and Bourne End have agreed to me taking a sabbatical this year. I will be away from both parishes from 8<sup>th</sup> May until 12<sup>th</sup> August. During this time, I will be focusing on different forms of prayer to enrich my prayer life so I might grow as a follower of Jesus and therefore be better able to serve you, and so I am equipped in new ways to lead us at Sunnyside and Bourne End as we seek to grow in prayer. I will be away for most of my sabbatical but will be in Berkhamsted for some of the time. There are plans being put in place for whilst I am away so that no one person is overburdened because of my absence and some key people will know how to contact me if necessary. I will write about these plans in the newsletter next week so that you know what is happening.

I am extremely aware of that a sabbatical is a real gift and am excited about what God intends to do through the different rhythm of life it offers me. Please be assured of my prayers whilst I am away, not least that Sunnyside and St John's will grow in spirit and in number over the coming months. I look forward to hearing about how God has been at work and to meeting new people who you will have built relationships with when I return. Meanwhile, my prayer will continue to be:

That our love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that we may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God.