

## **Vicar's Report to APCM 2007**

As ever I'd like to begin my report to the APCM with some thank yous. In particular I'd like to say thank you to you all for the way in which the parish has allowed me to plan for and then take a three month sabbatical. Perhaps not surprisingly, what I have to say this morning is mostly about or influenced by my time away. Most of my mental energy last year, after the APCM, was taken up with preparing for the conference at Windsor and then the sabbatical. There have, consequently, been no major projects, no radical changes to our pattern of services, way of doing things or to groups and meetings. I hope that I will be able to share the fruits of my sabbatical with you and the wider parish and more of that later but for now I just want to say that it has been a tremendously refreshing experience and I'm grateful to you all that I've been able to have it. One thing I will say at this point is that I've heard it said that there is anxiety in some quarters that after having had this time away, I will soon be on the look out for a new job. The truth in fact is quite the opposite. Since my first ordained post as a curate in Towcester, I've tended to arrive in places with some idea in my head about how long I expected to be in a place. Coming to Christchurch in 2003 was no different. However, one result of my reflections during sabbatical is to have let go of that way of thinking entirely. I am here. I am very happy to be here. I have no plans to go anywhere else. If that's not quite unequivocal enough for you, if it sounds as if it gives me a bit of Milliband-esque wriggle room, well tough. For such a 'on the one hand this and on the other hand that' sort of chap, that's about as definitive as I'm likely to be about anything.

Principal amongst those individuals who deserve our thanks this morning are our church wardens, Chris and Sue. Both have worked tremendously hard through the last year and we are lucky to have them both. I'm sure that Chris won't mind if I spend a moment expressing our special thanks to Sue as she steps down this morning from her role as church warden after six years of commitment, hard work, sacrifice and an energetic service to God and this church community which has been a blessing to us all. I feel totally liberated into using all the superlatives I feel like using knowing that Sue can't be here this morning, so I can say it like it is and she can stop reading (if indeed she ever picks up a copy of this report) whenever she likes. The truth is that Sue has been a tower of strength and support to me as well as many of you in our life together as the church in this parish. Almost tireless, always here, ready with ideas, tools and keys she is an impossible act to follow. Together we are going to have to recognize that and now that our wardens' team is different we must be ready to do certain things in different ways. I hope that you will give generously to the collection being made for Sue so that when she returns we will be able to show her how grateful we are. I won't be able to be anywhere near as fulsome when Sue is in the room but I think that she knows that we know how much we owe her...if you see what I mean.

This brings me on to Mark. It hasn't been easy to find someone willing to be church warden and I am really happy that Mark has agreed to accept the challenge. He is not Sue and will not do the job in the same way. He brings his own gifts and talents to the job and I look forward to working with him and Chris on what lies ahead. After this morning's 'elections', there are changes to the PCC. Sharon Mawhinney steps down from the PCC this morning and we are very grateful to her for three years sterling work on the full council as well as the social committee. It is also a pleasure to accept the re-nominations of Brenda and Heather who are to serve for a further three year period. We welcome Ebenezer Osinuga and Rachel Harrison to the PCC. Both are committed members of the church and we thank them for being ready to serve in this way. This year, I would also like to thank Bill Petch for his work at church. For some time now Bill has been invaluable as someone we can call upon for repair and maintenance jobs around the church and hall. Recently, Bill has also taken on a fuller role looking after the gardens. This sort of commitment and willingness to serve is a tremendous gift to the church and we are grateful. Many of you will also know how much the parish owes to Sara Taylor-Coolahan in the Parish Office. In the normal course of events, she is calm, organised and clear thinking. During my sabbatical she has been brilliant. Having the parish office in the vicarage is not ideal in any circumstances, but we knew that during my time 'away' much of which I was going in fact to be at home, it would be doubly tricky. Sara has struck the perfect balance between the reality of having to be there and the need to keep my home and work lives as separate as possible. She has 'gate-kept' superbly and worked really hard with Sue and others to keep the administrative life of the parish on the rails. We are indeed very grateful for her common sense, sensitivity and good humour.

As I've indicated already, much of my year has been taken up with planning for and then taking my sabbatical. At the suggestion of the Diocesan Canon Theologian, Jane Steen, who co-ordinates sabbatical breaks, I will be taking a week of my holiday in June in order to write up my thoughts, experiences and reflections and then propose a number, probably three, evenings on which I will offer to share with the parish some of the fruits of my time away. Today I am happy to echo the thoughts I shared on my first Sunday back that I am convinced that I need to pay greater attention in my ministry to the core elements of being a parish priest, namely preaching and teaching, pastoral visiting and prayer.

I have never understood myself to be the one, in any of my ordained positions, who will 'run' the parish or chaplaincy. However, in my time away I have seen that I have often allowed myself to be pulled into ways of working that would give that impression. I have, for many years, neglected the role of being the one who is called especially to find the time to pray for the people I serve and I will want to begin to put that right. I will want to operate more 'conversationally' with church goers and those outside our immediate community and I will want to give proper place to preparing to preach and the task of teaching the faith.

We do so many things well here. We are a genuinely warm, accepting Christian community, we acknowledge the need always to be looking beyond our walls first, our choir sing beautifully, our relationships are good, we pay attention to the needs of the whole range of people and ages that make up our community. We eat and drink well; we offer a variety of ways of worship and celebration. I am happy this morning to report a parish in good heart. It isn't heaven and there's plenty to do. The storms rage around us in the Anglican world at home and abroad, we should engage in the discussions, have our say, play our part but in the end remember that we are here to be the people God calls us to be in this place. We are here to show where God is at work in the lives of the people of this parish, to remind ourselves that we are loved and to show what a cause for celebration that is. We are a people whose lives have been touched with joy and we should live in a way that shows it.

At the end of his book 'Velvet Elvis' Rob Bell concludes: 'The Church will continue to roll across the ages, serving and giving and connecting people with God and each other. People will abuse her and manipulate her and try to control her but they will pass. She will keep going. Amen to that.'