

Vicar's report 2020 – 2021

Last Summer when we finally held our last AGM I did not think we would be spending the following winter in lockdown, nor hearing of deaths nearing 2,000 per week during the second wave. There are many reasons for sadness, but I want to report what, in spite of everything, we have managed to achieve as a Church, and how God has been good to us and faithful.

I thought this year would one of financial meltdown both for this parish and for the diocese of Newcastle. After all, we have been unable to do any fundraising as such. Instead, our experience here has been of the great generosity of a number of people and also of the success of Claire Bradley, encouraged by Joanne Christie from Newcastle Diocese, in applying for grants being administered by Northumberland County Council. This gives us the opportunity to look forward from a position of relative stability.

I felt very strongly last year that it was unacceptable to lock people out of their Church, and St. Helen's has remained open throughout, without any disasters taking place. Whenever possible, we have celebrated in Church on Sundays, and I want to express my appreciation of the faithfulness of our Church warden Jenny, who every week has made sure the Church is cleaned, safe and ready for worship and to our Churchwarden Barbara, who has often been our 'choir' on Sunday mornings.

Our congregation is currently very small. There are some for whom lockdown has meant just that, some who do not feel it is safe as yet to gather with others in Church, and others who are prevented by ill-health from attending. Our faithful organist, Shirley Nixon, is recovering slowly from surgery, and Tom Cowing is in upper Teesdale, so what singing we manage is unaccompanied.

The high point for me was Christmas. The 'Lockdown Nativity' on Youtube, which replaced our Christmas Eve service, was enjoyed by people right around the world, and was a moment of pure joy. I want to play tribute to the energy and inventiveness of Carole my wife, the technological skills of Katherine my daughter, and the many talents and enthusiastic support of Dave Southern, together with the families of Hexhamshire who brought our Christmas story to life.

Carole also produced the Christmas Eve trail, enjoyed by a good number of families on a snowy day, and supported by the hospitality of Claire Bradley, and the Lea family at Mollersteads and Robin at Carol Charlton at the Mill house. It was thanks to the Charltons that we were able to enjoy open air services in the Summer, with unrestricted singing, and I hope and pray this may have created a precedent for years to come.

Technology has provided us with new opportunities to be the Church: Sunday videos, thanks to Katherine, and e-mailed notes, enable me to reach out to those who cannot come to Church, and Zoom has enabled us to come together not only for meetings but to pray and study during Lent. I am sure there are lessons we

have learnt, and we will continue to use these tools even after the pandemic is past.

I want to say thank you to David Wilson our Hon. Treasurer, and to Ralph Wrighton, our retiring Hon. Sec. who has continued to support us in a most difficult year for him and his family. I want to say thank you to Ruth Marlee who continues to encourage people to support the Church via the rota she puts together. I want to thank faithful people who read and lead prayers in church, who bring flowers, and who keep the Church alive.

This year we had two weddings, one attended only by the couple and their witnesses, and no baptisms at all. I look forward to four weddings in the coming year, but also to making children part of the life of this Church. I look forward to being able to do what we do well as a Church: to be hospitable. Alongside those who mourn, sharing the joy of those who celebrate, welcoming friends and strangers on our Open Day, at prayer and worship and at the Lord's table; the opportunities are there.

All Churches have had to change enormously in the past twelve months, and change is here to stay. Far better that we should be agents of change and renewal than that we should simply wait for change to happen.

Rev A Patterson