

## **2021 Annual Address - Isaiah 40: 28-31 / Psalm 119:105**

### **A Roadmap for the Future**

How are you all doing? How are you feeling? In my address at the last Annual Meeting, held unusually in October last year, I reflected on the fact that no one could have ever foreseen what 2020 would hold for us - and this year too (2021) is already proving to be just as challenging. Whilst our transition back into the church building late July last year was a welcome relief, the concern that the pandemic would worsen was realised, and January heralded another lockdown, and the return to streamed services only. The 'pause' button continues to be pushed on many of our ministries and activities, but don't worry - we have a roadmap to enable ministries and activities to start up once again - more on this shortly!

It's said that every cloud has a silver lining, and one of the positive things to emerge from St Mary's live-streamed services is that they continue to reach so many more people than we'd normally see attending in the church building. To everyone who joins us online - thank-you for the opportunity to be part of your lives. As we emerge from this pandemic, it is our intention to keep streaming a weekly Sunday service. We want you to continue being a part of the life and ministry of St Mary's - so please do keep in touch.

At this time it is appropriate to thank all those who continue to help resource our streamed services - the video Camera and AV operators, the Musicians, those taking part in the services either in person or by video, the churchwardens for ensuring the building is ready every Sunday and of course my wife Julie and daughter Sarah who have tirelessly supported services through the weeks - thank-you to all of you!

The reality though is that the pandemic continues to be an intense and demanding time for so many of us. Many continue to adapt to new work/life patterns that can be more pressurised than pre-pandemic days. Others have had to adjust their lives around being furloughed, which brings a different set of challenges too. Where ever you are at, all of us, including those in the community, need to recover well: emotionally, physically and spiritually speaking, because a good recovery is essential.

As our reading from Isaiah 40 earlier reminded us (and yes I used this at last year's Annual Meeting too),

*But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.*

- Will we allow God to *renew our strength* when we feel exhausted?
- Will we allow God to enable us *to soar on wings like eagles* above everything that is going on around us?
- Will we allow God to enable us to *walk and run*?

The truth is, true restoration is only found in God, and if we want to be truly restored, we need to allow His healing touch to touch each of our lives. To allow God to touch each of our lives, we are going to open the church building at various times for people to come and process their experiences through the use of safe spaces. At the heart of each of these spaces will be three key things (thanks to CPAS for their help here!).

First slide please Gavin. The three things are:

- remembering what has happened;
- reflecting on how the pandemic has impacted our lives (both the good things and the challenging things);
- and finding those ways to recover and recuperate well.

Some of these spaces will be guided, others will be self-guided. There will also be a Wellbeing course on offer for those who feel they would benefit from this.

These, I believe, are the most important things all of us need to do, because if we don't remember, reflect and recover well, we will store up more problems for ourselves further down the line. As such, these spaces lie at the heart of our church's roadmap out of the present pandemic and will take the leadership the next couple of months to develop and put in place.

Before I outline some roadmap proposed dates, we are aware that for some people, it will be too cautious, for others it may be too fast, whilst for others, it may be just about right. We have sought to use the Government's roadmap for guidance, because we believe we must get this process right whilst helping everyone to recover well. So what could the next few months look like for us as a Church? Next slide please:

The church's roadmap consists of 5 stages:

1. The reopening of both the Sunday 10am Service & the Wednesday 9am Service to people to attend.
2. The provision and use of safe spaces, some of which may be offered within existing ministries and activities
3. Events for people to reconnect with each other
4. Restoring the two Sunday morning 9am & 10.30am Services
5. Other ministries & activities start up, some of which could be shaped differently by an exciting new project!

I'll now briefly outline each of these stages.

Next slide please. **First**, we have the reopening of both the Sunday 10am Service & the Wednesday 9am Service to people to attend. As a leadership, we want to be cautious and allow enough time to see how the Covid19 infection rates are impacted by both Schools opening tomorrow (8 March) and the reopening of the non-essential sector on 12 April. This stage is timed to coincide with the reopening of indoor hospitality and indoor activities from Monday 17 May. As such, Pentecost Sunday, **Sunday 23rd May** is when you will be able to start attending services again in the church building. Likewise the Wednesday service will start on **Wednesday 26th May**. What a celebration this will be on Pentecost Sunday!

Next slide please. **Secondly**, the provision and use of safe spaces, some of which may be offered within existing ministries and activities will start up from **Monday 24th May**, again in line with the opening of indoor hospitality and indoor activities. It is envisaged that these will be available on a selection of weekdays as well as the weekend - further details will be available closer to the time.

Next slide please. **Thirdly**, events for people to reconnect with each other. One thing that has been particularly hard during this time is not being able to engage with each other. These events, taking place after **21st June** when we hope the final social restrictions will have been lifted will be opportunities for us to enjoy quality time with each other over the summer. Events could include BBQ's, Afternoon Teas and 'Speed Connections'.

Next slide please. The **Fourth** Stage focuses on restoring our regular Sunday 9am & 10.30am Services. Having allowed time for people to recover well and to start engaging with each other once again following the lifting of all social restrictions, the familiar pattern of Sunday Services will start again from **Sunday 5th September**. One of the factors influencing this timing is that each service's resourcing needs to be rebuilt, to ensure they are viable going forward.

Next slide please. The **Fifth** and final stage is the starting up of other ministries and activities in **September & October**, some of which it is hoped will be reshaped around food! Many of you will know that St Mary's is known as never knowingly underfed, however those who have helped with the catering at St Mary's over the years know only too well the frustrations and severe limitations one has had to work with. No longer! Today we launch an exciting new project - the Kitchen Project, that will help us reshape existing ministries and grow new ones all around food! Do visit the website, where you can find the link to the project information on the homepage

Can I encourage you to set aside the rest of this month during this Season of Lent, to reflect on the part all of us can play in supporting this project. As we arrive at Easter Sunday, it is my hope that as we celebrate the good news of Jesus' resurrection, we are also able to celebrate the provision of a Kitchen.

So, there we have an outline of our roadmap - going forward, the church will look and sound different compared to pre-pandemic days. As we continue to reflect and reimagine what it means to be God's Church post Covid19, ask yourself, what part are you going to play in reaching out to the world around us, with the love of Christ? In everything we do, we need to ensure that the words of Psalm 119:105 are at the heart of our very existence and being. Last slide please. As the Psalmist says:

*Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light on my path*

We need to allow God's word to guide us through this time - knowing that when we're tired or feeling discouraged, we know from his word that He is faithful. He will never let us go and even in the darkest night, He is our light.

Rev'd Timothy Robb

Vicar, St Mary's Eaton Socon - March 2021