

FIRST ANNIVERSARY SERMON AS VICAR OF GREAT MISSENDEN WITH BALLINGER AND LITTLE HAMPDEN

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is hard to believe that this past Friday, the 14th of July marked the anniversary of Janet and I moving into the Vicarage. What's more, this coming Wednesday, the 19th of July is the anniversary of my having been Collated, Inducted and Installed as your Vicar. This is then the Vicar's anniversary sermon, and thus a little different from your usual Gospel based message. (Although the gospel reading's theme of planting seeds is rather appropriate.)

The installation service took place on what was the hottest day of the year, having reached 40 degrees Celsius. After the service, as many of you will remember, we were served canapes and wine. I was offered a glass of Cape Sauvignon Blanc, which I practically hoovered up as I was so hot. Some of us went out to see the rainbow over the church that evening, after a short, but welcome shower of rain. I remarked at the time what a blessing that was in isiZulu tradition and prayed that it would be the start to a productive and blessed incumbency.

Well, here we are almost twelve months to the day later, and I like to think that my incumbency in this Parish has thus far been greatly blessed, albeit that, as with any parish, there have been challenges, the departing of loved ones in our community and the ever-present concerns of how we as the Church in a modern secular and materialistic world, continue to reach out to people who might be looking for God, but don't know how to find Him.

When, some years ago, I was appointed to the post of Headmaster of St Martin's Preparatory School in the south of Johannesburg, I was offered some very sound advice by a retired head who said; "For the first year, try not to change anything. Carefully observe the procedures, protocols, and traditions of the school, as it proceeds through its termly calendars, and

record any concerns you may have for future reference, which you might address in the next academic year. In this way, you won't be seen as the new broom determined to sweep clean and thus upset all those with whom you work."

In many respects, this is what I have tried to do here. I have been greatly blessed in having such a supportive group of people in many different capacities, who have been very willing to guide me in the way in which things have usually been done, as well as giving advice when required.

The year certainly seems to have flown by. Consulting the 2022/2023 diary there is much evidence, if indeed such evidence is required, of a very busy parish with a full calendar and supported by people who undoubtedly love the parish, our buildings, and our community. In fact, without our willing volunteers who serve in countless capacities, we would be a ship adrift and at the mercy of the currents.

I am indeed very grateful to those who have served and continue to serve on the PCC, Brenda, our Church Warden, the Standing Committee, and the various sub committees which keep the daily life and governance of the parish on an even keel. There are two committees who have been particularly busy in recent months, are they are the fabric committee and finance committee.

No doubt, many of you are aware that we are presently researching the possibility of how best we might improve the use of this church building, in terms of space, storage, versatility of worship and events and, of course, as a well preserved place of historical interest for both parishioners and the broader Great Missenden Community who still regard this as their church, even if we only see some of them from time-to-time.

This has come about largely due to our initiating it at the Indaba Meeting in February and the talk we heard from our Archdeacon, the Venerable Guy Elsmore. The Fabric Committee has identified a group of architects who are highly qualified in the field of church preservation and reordering, with whom we are consulting with the view to what would be an ideal way of proceeding.

Financially speaking, we are indeed indebted to all those who help support our parish through their regular giving, as well as those who organise numerous fund-raising events through the course of the year to keep us out of the red and thus help to keep the parish functioning, as well as

supporting the diocese. We are likewise grateful to the financial committee who, thanks to their years of experience, keep us within our annual budget and keep a close eye on the books.

I encourage all who at this point are not regular givers, either through weekly contributions or monthly standing orders, to prayerfully consider becoming a giver, otherwise the work of the church will ultimately suffer. God loves a cheerful giver, as the bible expresses it.

The pastoral work of the parish is indeed large, and the pastoral support team and I are certainly kept very busy. Both Tricia Neale, our LLM and Slava Miles, keep us up to date as regards who is on the daily prayer list and who needs visiting either at home or in hospital. Prayers in the Lady Chapel are available with pastoral team members at both morning services and prove very helpful and supportive to those who come forward.

The choir, organists, altar servers and sacristans have continued to ensure that our worship is well planned and led, and we are so very blessed in having them maintain the high standards of worship that we are thus able to offer. One must also thank Lucy and the bell ringers in making the community aware of our presence Sunday-by-Sunday as well as for weddings and other special occasions.

If there is one area in which I perhaps have pushed the envelope since my arrival, it has been in the redesigning of the service book for ordinary time, which we shall start using fairly soon, as well as the drawing up and printing of the various seasonal service books that we use from All Saints though to Advent, followed by Christmas, Epiphany, Lent, Easter and so on. I am very grateful to Harriet Lemon for all her hard work in this regard, as well as to the proofreaders who assist with the final checking of the drafts.

Although we might feel tempted to pat ourselves on the back for what has been achieved and for what is being well maintained, we must not allow ourselves to become complacent. There is much that we need to grow as well as ensuring a series of succession plans for the future.

It was with this in mind that we held the Indaba in February, so as to look at the must-haves verses the nice-to-haves and the need to create a sound foundation for future development of that which has been entrusted to us as stewards of this parish.

The Indaba highlighted several important needs. I have already spoken about the work being done by the Fabric and Finance Committees, but these are only two parts of a broader context. Here are a few examples:

We are still planning in terms of the Young People's Church, focussing on various ways of interacting with the different age groups as we have in MAP, which is officially Reception to Year 4, then our aged ten plus, and now, as we have more going to secondary school, the planning of a fully fledged Youth Group which could potentially meet once a week, separate from Sundays. There are plans afoot for a children's choir, and the establishing of a Marimba Band which could perform and lead worship on the third Sunday of each month, as we saw demonstrated at the recent Patronal Festival and Bicentenary Service of our Church of England Primary School. (An adult Marimba group is also being considered considering interest shown.)

Closer cooperation and contact with the Great Missenden Church of England School has resulted in some exciting projects over the past year, and more are being planned, especially when it means that we will have the children and their supportive parents in the church on a termly basis. We are also considering an Animal Service with our young people and the school for the Feast of St Francis of Assisi in October, and a celebratory service for the families of children baptised within the last year.

I take a religious assembly at the school each Monday morning, whilst Tricia and Lucy have been visiting the reception group at the same time. Paula Kitching and I are Foundation Governors, whilst Chris Nickless, Keith Ray, Elizabeth Webster, and I serve on the Charities Trust.

Our outreach team is also a very hard-working group, as the various events and concerts in the church show. These events take hours of planning and coordinating, and we are blessed in having them as part of our parish family. With this in mind, the Church and the Oldham Hall are available for hire for special occasions as well as for weekly meetings and activities. This will continue to be an area in which we will concentrate our efforts to keep this fund-raising aspect strong and growing.

It's not only important from a fund-raising point of view, but also as a means of meeting and reaching out to the broader community, some of whom are lapsed church goers, others who have never been churched, and some who believe that they are only allowed into a church if invited.

We need to change these perceptions and make it known that this is a house open all day to anyone who feels drawn within its walls. I have always been struck by how welcoming and loving our church family is, and so we should make it our mission to let that love touch those who we pass in the streets each day.

As your priest, I am aware that we are certainly not perfect. We are human and we fail God and each other. Let us remember that charity begins at home, and by charity, I am not referring to the cash version, but that of love. Sometimes we upset each other without realising that we do so. We are quick to judge and forget that to be a team in the service of the Lord, we must accept each other, foibles, faults and all.

I am sure that over this past year that I may have dropped the ball on a number of occasions and not always been what perhaps you wish your Vicar to be. I may be ordained, but I am human, and I therefore make mistakes. (Janet is still disappointed that I cannot turn water into wine!)

If I have offended any of you or let you down, I unreservedly apologise and will try to do better. Please pray for me. The clergy here, both Alan and I, need your prayers just as we pray for all of you.

Janet and I feel greatly blessed and privileged that God has called us to Great Missenden. As I said upon our return from South Africa several weeks ago, it's great to be home, because albeit only a year has passed, the village and parish have become very much home, thanks to your love, prayers, and support.

May the Lord, through our labours and prayers, continue to build our parish, guide us in our succession planning and unite us in his service and love, as we plant the seeds Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel. God bless you all and thank you for what you each do in your own unique way for the common good of our community.

May the year ahead be as exciting and blessed as the last twelve months.

Amen.