



**Sermon: Annual Review Sunday 23rd April 2016**

The Revd Jos Perris

John 13:31-35

There is a song in the musical 'My Fair Lady' where Eliza Doolittle, the young female character, sings 'Words! Words! I'm so sick of words! I get words all day through; first from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do? Don't talk of stars burning above; if you're in love, show me!' She is being coached to sound like a high-born lady when, as I am sure you know, she had actually come from a very poor background. Words to her are a tool that could lead her into a different life but she wants to go beyond words to the reality they contain. If Freddie (the young man) loves her, then he has to do much more than tell her pretty stories, dream marvellous dreams or utter polite phrases – she wants action!

Well this last year, 2015, has certainly been a year of action at St Peter's Church. There has been so much that has been going on and I cannot mention everything or everyone but I would like to mention some highlights, using our Strapline: A Church for the City, Welcoming All, Celebrating Life & Sharing the Journey.

**1. We describe ourselves as A Church for the City**

Keeping God's commandments is not a tick list of things to achieve, but a way of life to bring abundant life not just to ourselves, but to our communities. Jesus' tiny community of 12, plus women who travelled with and ministered to them, had to show commitment to that community and to its well-being.

Here at St Peter's we are a community of so many helpers for every service: from Reg and the Sanctuary Guild setting up, with sidesmen, welcomers, servers, readers, intercessors, bell ringers, choir and musicians, florists and a ministry team. And we come together as a church community, week by week, service by service, to give thanks to God, praise his name, to pray for our world and to pray for one another.

A particular highlight last year was the Alban Pilgrimage where the Archbishop of Canterbury, Archbishop Justin, was part of the procession and preached. Other highlights included the very successful Friends events, masterminded by the new Chair, Robin, and particularly the inaugural Christmas Fair. Our Wednesday concerts continued to be a prominent presence in our city, 38 concerts in last year alone, raising about £5k for Grove House and bringing in lots of non-church people as well as many members of our congregation. We have been hugely grateful for all that Tony has done and his team have continued to do.

Being Community has been brilliantly demonstrated through our Community Nights and through all our house groups co-ordinated by Richard. The Community Nights have a focal point which in 2015 included Thanksgiving and Music. They are a great opportunity to meet with one another as friends. We take it in turns to serve one another, either through food, or guided discussion or through prayer.

We have the most amazing Churchyard and, largely due to Peter and Dee, it has been beautifully maintained, which also says something about us to the people of the city: that we care for God's Creation.



## **2. We describe ourselves as Welcoming All – inclusivity is very important to us**

In our Acts reading, Peter's anxiety about keeping the food laws almost means that non-Jews would have been excluded from the Gospel if Peter had not listened carefully to the vision God gave him: 'What God has made clean, you must not call profane'. Peter's decision about whether non-Jews could be included in God's kingdom came not from a common sense decision but from a renewed understanding of God's love for the whole creation which God had made clean. He had begun to show the love of Jesus by eating with non-Jews, just as Jesus had eaten with those considered to be outside the love of God and then saw God's loving action pour the Holy Spirit on these same people.

We show our Welcome and Inclusivity in so many ways, whether it be through our different styles of worship, like Common Worship and BCP, Forest Church, Lectio Divina and Contemplative Fire. We are all unique, and different styles of worship connect with different people. It is so important that we continue to be inclusive in our Worship and in the world at large.

Margaret has organised many Cultural Events, Social Events and the Book Group which also meet people in a different way.

Several of us volunteer at Open Door where we meet people who often feel completely lost and broken and unloved. It has been an opportunity for us to really show that God loves us all equally. With our continued involvement financially and through governance, The Living Room has continued to grow in St Albans and we have been very much part of this journey of transforming people's lives through freedom from addiction. Our Christian Aid team last year had another successful year collecting over £2k to help develop long term sustainable resources in third world countries.

We have also supported the District Foodbank and many of you here have been very generous in your contributions to this very good cause.

## **3. We also say that we are here to Celebrate Life**

From birth through to death, through all the work we do with Baptisms, Messy Church, Junior Church, school work, toddler groups, Parenting, Choirs, F@F, Youth Café, Weddings and Funerals.

There have been several key appointments last year that have enabled this work to grow. Margaret was appointed as Pastoral Chaplain in September with a focus of developing the pastoral work and has set up the very successful Tea on Tuesdays and newly developed Bereavement team.

Sarah Brandt became our Messy Church leader and Children's Co-ordinator and we have seen Messy Church and Junior Church grow considerably this year.

Charles joined us on placement whilst training for ministry and immediately became heavily involved in overseeing our F@F group and helping with Youth Café.

As Charles says in his report on F@F – children are the best advocate. What he was referring to is the George Fan Club. When George started at F@F, without any intention of his, most of his class followed him. He dare not say anything about F@F anymore at school as he is worried that even more might come! He definitely is our best F@F recruiter and evangelist – whether he likes it or not!

Also I was delighted by my new appointment as Associate Priest and Missioner for young families, especially focusing on building relationships through baptisms and weddings and working closely with the children and youth work. Our Baptism and Wedding ministry has continued to blossom, and we are very grateful for all that Jan has contributed to this important part of our ministry. My



two highlights have got to be the Wedding Celebration Evening where we invite all the wedding couples back for an evening of dinner and a chance for them to renew their vows. And also the Baptism Celebration Service where we invite all the recently Baptised (and their families) back to renew their vows and enjoy a brunch of bacon butties!

My two highlights in relation to the children and youth work has got to be the Vicarage Camping on the first weekend of July, when we had the most phenomenal electric storm and we all stayed up most of the night to the most stunning light show. My other highlight has to be the Youth Residential weekend where about 20 teenagers & 3 Youth Leaders went off to Carrotty Wood for the weekend and had a lot of fun together and I learnt a whole array of teenage pranks (due to Tom).

One of our greatest contributors to the way we celebrate life here at St Peter's is through our musical tradition, and the standard of our choral music never ceases to amaze me. The choristers have continued to be nurtured and developed through music, friendship and community by Nick, Alex, Nicky and Annie. We also had another hugely successful choir trip this time to Edinburgh which I know was enjoyed enormously by all the choristers and I believe the rest of the choir too!

#### **4. We say that we are here to Share the Journey**

In our Gospel reading, Jesus is telling his disciples to love each other as he has loved them, so what does that look like? Well, he spent most of his time with them, forgave and healed them, got cross and wept and feasted with them. Jesus taught them with stories and through his example – he washed their feet and, rather than run away, he went to his death in Jerusalem with them still following on.

The relationship with Marlborough Road Methodist Church has continued to grow and it was a wonderful moment when both Rosemary and Peter were given permission by the Bishop to officiate at our Holy Communion Services. I know there is lots to read about the Anglican/Methodist Covenant in our Newsletter!

We also saw the continued development and growth of our ecumenical relationships, particularly with the city centre churches but also within Churches Together. The culmination of which was a Christmas stall we ran together to raise money for 'Doctors of the World.'

Last year we set up and launched our own Traidcraft stall that has been ran very successfully on a monthly basis.

Our Communications went through a radical face lift last year, with the launch of our new website, our Facebook and Twitter feed and importantly the appointment of Becky as voluntary Publicity Officer. A lot of work has gone into this, most particularly by Deborah, Becky and Moira, and it is so important that we do communicate with the world, what is going on here at St Peter's so that we can share the journey.

The Gospel today is very short but full of energy. Jesus tells them he has only got a little while longer with them and that they cannot come with him to where he is going. The new commandment is not just to love in an airy-fairy way but 'Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.' That's what the love has to be like – like the love that Jesus has shown them.

Another very important part of St Peter's life and how we show Jesus' love to others, is the quieter, more understated side of our prayer group and prayer chain, led by Sheelagh, and the anointing for healing, previously led by Nancy and now led by Gill. This is the bedrock of what we do and it is



through those people who are diligently committed to pray, that we are sustained and enabled as a church.

Jesus' love has been tough love – with both joy and anger, feasting and fasting, forgiving and healing, leading and serving. It has not been a gush of emotional feeling but a purposeful and costly relationship of being together so that nothing is hidden any longer. Being Eastertide I am aware that it is a time when both extremes are central. There was death, then resurrection. There was darkness and then there was light.

Last year, one of the most significant events that took place was of course the announcement of Anne becoming Bishop of Aston. It was a time of hugely mixed emotions; great joy for her in the recognition of her episcopal gifts but great sadness to be losing a vicar who had led this church with such energy and creativity for the last 5 and a half years. On a personal note, I will forever be grateful to Anne, for the time and the training that she gave to me. There have been moments over this last 6 months, since she left, when something has happened, or not happened, and I have giggled to myself (thinking, thank goodness Anne didn't see that!). She is a perfectionist, which was not always easy for me; but I was so lucky to have had the opportunity to be trained by, and to work alongside her.

The greatest sadness from last year, for our church community, was the death of Godfrey Lloyd. He was an amazing man who brought such gentleness and spirituality to this church and I personally miss him very much. He had the wonderful calming effect on me and whenever I feel a bit anxious, I just have to imagine Godfrey with me, which immediately brings me peace and puts a smile on my face! He really was a true Saint and he is probably now teaching those other Saints a thing or two! I am also aware that there were other huge losses amongst our congregation last year of loved ones that died and we give thanks for all they have been in our lives.

It has been a challenging period since last September, as a church in an interregnum. But what I have been amazed by, is how we as a church community have really worked together as a team, as the body of Christ and (to use Bishop Michael's analogy) we have kept this particular boat afloat. Whilst it has been rather busy, I have really enjoyed being part of a ministry team, working closely with the staff team (Moir, Carolyn and Reg) and we have all been hugely supported by the Church Wardens (Den, Deborah and Mark) and by our new Treasurer, Paul. I don't even think there has been a cross word amongst us!

Yes there may have been the odd thing that has slipped, but not much. I was not sure how it would feel being in a boat that could start moving backwards or at best tread water. But I actually feel that due to us all working together we have actually continued to move forward in the direction that Anne set us in, inevitably at a much slower pace, (which may not have been a bad thing). And we have continued to thrive as a community and this is due to everyone here.

I hope when the new vicar is announced, we will enter a new chapter of the book of St Peter's. A chapter that has huge potential to continue to reach out to people, to show God's love in the wider community and to be a beacon of hope and love for our city.

### **And so in Conclusion**

The command to love pulls us all together, to ensure that we don't just offer one another or the world, fine words, but instead offer the actions of Jesus who feeds and washes, encourages and gets angry sometimes, and goes to the bitter end and beyond for love of the world.

Jesus is the Word who goes beyond words, to show love to us all and calls us all, to continue to do the same for others. Amen.