

Sunday 21st March

“Who we are, and what we do....”

Jeremiah 31:31-34

John 12: 20-33

Today is the last in our series of sermons thinking about what the church might be like as we emerge from the pandemic. We have thought over the past few weeks about the priorities of helping establish the Kingdom of God, encouraging more people to follow Jesus and following him more closely ourselves. The discussions we have had on Wednesdays and Thursdays have been far reaching and very constructive.

Today I would like to bring some of these thoughts together by thinking a little about our worship, and then outlining where we might go from here as we put some of these ideas into practice.

Up until this time last year – the anniversary of the first lockdown is this coming Tuesday 23rd March – our regular worship pattern across the three churches in the Parish was fairly well established

In St James on Sundays at 8 and 10, plus midweek services on Tuesdays and Thursdays
In St John’s at 9 each Sunday, and at CTK at 10:30 each Sunday.
And nearly all of these services were Eucharistic.

This pattern – certainly as far as St James was concerned – had been fixed for many years. The times of the services at Christ the King and St Johns have changed a bit, but the services themselves have remained much the same. When Peter and I introduced monthly non Eucharistic services a couple of years back there were a number of people who felt the change was unnecessary and unwelcome, and that non eucharistic services were in some way not real worship.

But now – a year on – our starting point is very different.

There are a good number of us who have not worshipped in a church building and have not had the opportunity to take communion for over a year. And yet we have still been able to worship God. We have learned new ways of praying, new ways of praising, new ways of experiencing his love and concern, new ways of gathering together even though we have not been able to meet in the same physical space

As the lockdown begins to ease and as we can see on the horizon the possibility of the whole church community gathering together again it is surely the right time to ask some questions. Should we simply revert to the worship pattern we had a year ago, or should we take this opportunity to have a good look at what we do? Are there things we have learned in this past year that it would be wise to incorporate into our worship? Is it time to recognise that it doesn’t have to be as it has always been?

And there are other factors to consider as well. Before the lockdown we had two full time clergy in the Parish – now we have only one. The retired priests – generous as they are with their time – are all a year older. Nick and Wendy have both had major health issues in the past year. They make a great contribution but their help is not something that can be taken for granted on a week by week basis.

The plain truth is that holding 4 communion services every Sunday morning across the Parish will not be possible. We have a team of very committed Readers, but they are unable to take communion services although they can take the lead in other type of worship. We will have to be creative about how we use our ministerial resources.

Musically Kevin Gill is retiring as St James organist in the Summer. He has been a great servant of St James, enriching worship immensely with his musical gifts over many years. And we have to accept that whatever we do about music in the future, it will not be the same as it has been in the past. Many churches – including St Johns and Christ the King in our own Parish – rely on volunteers who lead music as part of their commitment to the church. I am sure this is something we will have to at least consider as we look to the future.

In our sermons and midweek discussions over the past couple of weeks we have thought about people on the fringes of our churches. Those who have some contact with us but perhaps don't come regularly – or hardly at all – to Sunday worship. How would they feel at one of our regular services? Would coming to church be a positive experience for them? Would it make them want to come again?

We have shared some thoughts about how we could make people feel more comfortable in a church service and how we could be more welcoming. Liturgy and services that are more accessible and straightforward, inclusion of some less formal music, a more visible sense of community, a sense of expectancy of meeting God in worship, joy were some of the thoughts that we came up with.

So perhaps now is the time to think carefully and creatively about these things. But please don't be alarmed. There will not be change for changes sake. But this is a great opportunity to plan for the future rather than the past. Please join us in the discussion groups on Wednesday and Thursday to share your thoughts on how we might move forwards as we look at worship patterns and styles.

But it might be worth setting down some principles that have emerged from our conversations. Principles that will, I hope, guide us as we make plans for the future.

First we should be a people of prayer. A recognition that prayer underpins all we do and all we are. Prayer as we seek God's will for the way forwards; prayer as we bring our needs and desires to him; prayer as we intercede for the Parish and the world. And prayer as an essential part of our church life and worship. Also prayer that is not intercession – that is about growing in our relationship with God. Prayer as conversation with God.

Second, that we should be encouragers. We should be those who look for the positive in other people; those who seek to build up rather than put down; those who look for the

good of all rather than simply what works for us; those who want everyone – including ourselves – to develop and flourish.

And third welcomers. We have spoken a lot about welcoming. Wanting to become a church that accepts and welcomes people for who they are; a church that doesn't expect people to become "like us"; a church that makes people feel at home and comfortable; a church that is willing to change to include others. And a church that welcomes those already here! A church that is a real community, not isolated individuals or even small friendship groups. We all belong to each other.

And lastly, and really embracing all three of these. A church that wants to grow. Grow in our knowledge and understanding of God through worship and prayer. Grow in numbers as we welcome people with open arms and grow in our service to those around us as we encourage and build up community in and around Shirley.

And this is not just for "the church". Each and every one of us should live lives marked by prayer, encouragement. Welcome and growth. If we belong to the churches in Shirley Parish, this is who we are and what we do.

So – where do we go from here? How can we pool the ideas and thoughts we have had to produce a way forward that we are happy with?

We will begin this process on Wednesday and Thursday in the groups. If you can't make it then please phone or email in your thoughts and ideas. Alternatively have a word with the person who regularly phones you, or leave a message with the Parish Office

Then the Readers, Wardens and myself will meet soon after Easter to put together a possible service pattern and mission pattern. We will take account of all the comments and discussions we have had through Lent as we make these plans. We will then share our ideas with the PCC and the churches – the Annual Parochial Church Meeting might be one way of doing this.

But through all this we will be praying – can I ask for your prayers as we go through this process and seek God's guidance for all that we do.

So some questions for this week:

What might our service pattern look like as we move forward?

How can we best utilise our ministry team across our 3 churches?

How can we put the principles of prayer, encouragement, welcome and growth into practice in all that we do?

