

## **Vicar's report**

**These last eighteen months have been challenging in a way that none of us could have foreseen. The next year may be no less challenging. We simply don't know what the future holds. And of course that is always true. As a society we are unused to living with uncertainty and the global pandemic has been a salutary reminder of what is always true: we live in uncertain times.**

**Our worshipping life has been severely impacted by Covid. Overnight my ability to livestream worship, podcast and edit digital videos had to go from 0 to 60, although not at the speed of a Ferrari, more like a Fergusson tractor! As someone who enjoys learning new things, the frustrations were balanced out by satisfaction at finally mastering the technology, but virtual worship can be no substitute for a physical gathering together. I have dearly missed worshipping together - gathering around the Lord's Table, hearing Scripture interpreted into our lives, and the joy of taking with old friends and meeting new ones.**

**There are positives to be drawn out of the past seven months. Online engagement has held up well. The morning prayer podcasts seem to have really helped people in their faith and there has been great positivity around the online services. The challenge since the end of the summer has been keeping morale up as it began to sink in that this was not simply going to be a short-term phenomenon. A sustainable model of church that blends both online and physical services seems to be the direction that we are heading towards, and it is for this reason that we have restarted monthly evensong to complement the 10.30am Eucharist. Sustainability is the key word here, which is why as a Mission Partnership we have moved to collaborative online services. The limited clergy resources are simply not up to the task of producing individual online services alongside physical ones.**

**Of course, other than Covid the other significant event this year, for me at least, was taking on the role of priest-in-charge at St James Norton. I assumed responsibility for this on Geoffrey White's retirement in September 2019 and was licensed in a small service by the Bishop at the end of September 2020. In many ways Covid has shielded me from the full impact of leading two churches, although as a new pattern emerges new ways of working will become necessary if my own ministry is to be sustainable. The early months of 2020 already showed me that it was not possible to continue to lead two churches in the same way that I have for the past ten years led one. I will be speaking more about the future of ministry in St James for my talk at the APCM. On the plus side, I have, after seven years, handed in my resignation as area dean from the end of this year.**

**This has been a year of farewells, which have been all the more poignant as some have left without the possibility of a proper send off.**

**Helen Terry left in June to begin her curacy at Wadsley Bridge. Helen was such a gift to St Chad's and St James and both Helen and I felt the huge blow that her final months here were spent in lockdown. I know that she made some really important friends here and she had an impact far out of proportion with the short time that she has spent with us.**

**Sadder departures of course have been the deaths of Christine Spencer and Tony Spencer (unrelated). Both Christine and Tony served St James and the wider community in differing ways, Christine through the PCC and her work with the British Legion; Tony through his time as church warden of St James. Because of Covid neither were able to have the fully-attended service that they deserved.**

**That is not the note that I want to end on. The uncertainty of the past few months has reminded me powerfully of the experience that God's people go through with some regularity, namely that of exile. We have the strong Biblical paradigm of exile in the Old Testament. Peter in his first epistle describes Christians as being homeless - strangers and exiles - in a pagan world. Over the centuries we have replaced our nomadic tents with stone buildings, our laments of exile with upbeat worship songs and we have found a comfortable Christianity that fits in all too well with our Twenty First Century expectations. I, as much as anyone, have been perfectly happy with this accommodation to the spirit of the age. God has shaken us up and once again we find ourselves exiled from our expectations and assumptions. I don't want to underplay how painful this shaking up will be for many people (I'm thinking particularly of the housebound, the recently bereaved, the unemployed and the anxious) but God is in this and God will bring us through this, even if we don't know what kind of a world God will bring us into. We need to rediscover the spirituality of Abraham and Moses. A desert and an unknown land lie ahead, but God is already there before us.**

**My thanks go to everyone at St James who is sharing this journey into the unknown and has supported me and each other over the past months. I would especially like to thank Helen - our churchwarden, Jo Edwards and the other clergy in the Mission Partnership.**