

**Wednesday 18th November 2020**

**Elizabeth of Hungary, 1231**

Dear Friends

I'm a great believer in doing first what you want to do least. I cannot remember who taught me this but I am in their debt. It is a good way to help make every day end on a positive note!

So, this morning found me re-painting the garden furniture in the vicarage garage. Thankfully this is one task that does not need to be done every winter. It is boring, relentless and requires a great deal more concentration than it looks. The worst aspect of it though, is that just when you think you've finished, you turn the chair or table around and spot yet another face of wood that you've missed!

You've probably guessed where this anecdote is heading. Yes, it is an analogy for church life. There's a lot involved in keeping church going which is not exciting, not even particularly life-giving. Some of it really is boring too and never ending! I'm sure you're writing a list in your head as you read this...

The challenge we face today as churches is that there aren't as many people in good health or of the right age to do everything that needs doing. More and more falls on fewer and fewer shoulders. It's not encouraging.

I don't give up because, for all its faults, the Church has given me enormous blessings since my earliest memories. Deep down I want more people to experience the fellowship, support, love and encouragement that I have benefitted from for the whole of my life. I know you share that too.

What's to be done?

From this week I am beginning to analyse where my time goes by keeping a simple spreadsheet. I want to discover whether my instincts are accurate. My sense is that I am involved in almost no mission or outreach beyond our congregations at all. Almost the entirety of my ministry is focused on supporting the existing congregations or contributing to wider community initiatives in the town. Since arriving in Bromsgrove – 18 months at Christmas – I am sure the position has been getting worse.

For an Anglican vicar this imbalance strikes at the heart of how we perceive ministry. Unlike my Baptist colleagues, we are not congregational ministers; we share the cure of souls with the Bishop for all the people of the parish. Inevitably as congregations become weaker, more burden for congregational life falls upon the clergy and other priorities begin to be squeezed. One casualty is that the visibility of clergy in the parish is simply not what it was even a few years ago. We cannot exercise a similar ministry to those of predecessors within your living memory. I do not have the time to simply walk the streets and engage with people or spend an evening in the pub (were it open!) with my dog collar on.

We need to re-calibrate our church life in a way that means it still functions well but also leaves enough energy for missional outreach to our neighbours. Given the competition for people's time, only the faithful committed will start coming to a new church without a personal prompt. We are that prompt.

As we head towards 2021, I am already beginning to think of new year's resolutions for my personal and work life. Gosh, how we want to put 2020 behind us! Not the easiest or happiest of years in many respects.

We need to simplify church life so that it is sustainable for the future and at the same time, create space for our churches to grow. Unless we start to see some new faces in our churches then the church faces a very bleak future indeed.

One of the simple things you can do is to invite your friends to church; this is by far the easiest 'low hanging fruit' available to us (apologies for the marketing jargon!). We certainly all need to think about how to reach new people in the months ahead. This is a responsibility in which we all share, though I will, of course, provide the leadership.

That's a tough ask, but we're not in this alone. God is with us, and one way or another, we will celebrate the Good News this Christmas.

Go gently through this week, and see or speak with you all before long.

With God's blessing

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