

Wednesday 3rd February 2021

Dear Friends

With January behind us, I feel we can begin to look forward to Spring a little more optimistically. As I write this, the weather even feels just a tiny little bit milder...

Holding onto positives like this has proved so important over the last year. We've all had to dig deep into our mental and spiritual resources, and discovered, at times, gifts we didn't know we possessed: wisdom, knowledge, faith amongst others. The very gifts of which St Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians; the Gifts of the Spirit.

One of these gifts is miracles, and I for one am quite content to think of the scientific discovery of the vaccinations, as a scientific miracle of epic proportions. Something we should truly give thanks to God for. It's wonderful to see science and morality working so well together in this pandemic – I only hope that the morality of scientific achievement, can apply to the fair and equitable distribution of the vaccine too. The poor, I fear, will be last in line.

We rejoice, quite rightly, at human achievement, yet we expect far less of ourselves and others than God suggests we should. In the psalm set for this morning, the psalmist reminds us *"What are mortals, that you should be mindful of them; mere human beings, that you should seek them out? You have made them little lower than the angels and crown them with glory and honour."* (Ps8)

We usually read this and reflect on how much God loves us and cares for us. But then we tend to ignore the second part, that tells us just how close to God we are. If we are only a little lower than angels, the limits of our potential are far in excess of what we usually assume!

Another verse from the Psalmist (119.18) is also read today and is familiar to many from the liturgies of the church: *"Open my eyes that I may see the wonder of your law"*.

It is so easy to drift through life unaware of our gifts or potential as sons and daughters of God because our eyes are closed to the divine opportunities around and within us.

Next week I begin my sabbatical (15th Feb). Once every 7-10 years every cleric is allowed time off from ministry to study, refresh and relax. The idea is obviously biblical (sabbath) though in my case it has taken 11 years and I know others for whom it takes 20 years or more! Sabbaticals last for 13 weeks though for me I am splitting mine between this year and next as the pandemic prevents Liz and I from travelling to New Zealand which was the original idea for half of the time.

We shall be splitting our time between here and Derbyshire, and although I will be taking plenty of time off, I am also doing some study. My focus is not theological but ministerial as I will be looking at part-time parochial ministry, its strengths and weaknesses and how parishes can make a success of it. The reason for this focus is the challenge the church faces in the future. It is certain that there will be fewer full-time stipendiary priests in the years to come because congregations cannot afford them. Rather than seeing this simply as a loss, I want to turn the issue around, and identify the positives that might be involved in parishes transitioning to be served by part-time ministers, not all of whom might be ordained. Most of my study will take the form of conversations with existing part-time ministers who are running parishes. It might surprise you that some of these are Readers.

This change is already happening all over the country; but when changes like this are driven by finance, one senses the advantages might not be perceived and celebrated. There is a case for saying some of these developments should have been started many years ago. In 1960 the Bishop of Southwell wrote somewhat prophetically: "It may be that the future of the Ministry will be with a smaller number of whole-time clergy, more highly trained and qualified than at present, with a corps of supplementary priests round them."

It has taken 60 years and a pandemic to drive some of these developments' forwards.

Whilst I am away All Saints and St Godwald's is in very capable hands. We are blessed with so many amazing people in the churches in Bromsgrove – clergy, Readers, ALMs, churchwardens, musicians and a very large number of committed and involved Christians. I will be back to celebrate Palm Sunday with you and onwards through Holy Week towards Easter.

Until then, keep well, and remember how deeply God loves and holds you. My prayers for all continue. With every blessing,

David

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