

Dear Friends

July marks the beginning of my thirty sixth year of ordained ministry. When ordained in York Minster in 1975 the Church of England had a very different feel. For a start the fully ordained ministry was male! Modern language services were experimental, evensong was held in most churches and the 'Parish Share' or the Quota, was payable by most churches without a struggle. I was only twenty five years old; it wasn't uncommon to have young curates.

Today much has changed; most newly ordained clergy have had a previous career and are middle aged. Half or more are women; few churches hold evening services and multi parish benefices have become the norm – some clergy being responsible for up to ten parishes in some areas. Finances are a major challenge – the pot is now empty, even many diocesan reserves are down to just a matter of weeks. Congregations have shrunk as society has become more individualistic and selfish. The decline in Church attendance is mirrored by the decline in support for other societies such as trades unions, Rotary, WI and so on.

Today only a minority are interested in 'organised religion', the decline in marriage and baptisms has been dramatic. I leave it to you to judge if our nation is a happier place than it was in the seventies!

However the challenges have brought about change which I believe is for the good. It is right that the laity now take the place of clergy in leadership in most churches. It is right that women are ordained – after all women are two thirds of most congregations. It is right that we no longer live on the generosity of past generations, but pay our way as congregations. It is right that we now have worship that is contemporary so the 'un-churched' can access worship without struggling with sixteenth century language. It is right that those brought up with the beauty of the Prayer Book can still in some parishes like ours, have opportunity to worship in ways much loved. Above all it's right that we all take our responsibility as Christians to witness our faith.

The Apostolic Church was a movement of the Spirit. God changed lives by setting people free from forces that hobbled their lives; they found a Saviour, forgiveness, healing and hope. They also suffered terrible persecution as do many of our fellow Christians in the world today.

One of the great changes to our denomination has been the growth of the world wide Church. Today the strongest Anglican Church is in Nigeria with over twenty million members. The 'Global South' is now the centre of Anglicanism, not the UK or America where liberal attitudes have caused an exodus from the Episcopal Church. The African and Latin American Church is growing faster than the birth rate. They are poor Churches; the members are very sacrificial, joyful and have a very real faith in Jesus.

If our parishes are to survive, never mind grow, then we must be realistic. Our giving is way below diocesan average, which is over 3% of personal disposable income (5% is the target for Church giving). Many more could Gift Aid at no additional cost, but add 28p for every pound given – it only requires a form to be signed saying you are a tax payer. Attendance at Bible studies and prayer meetings is negligible. Churches that grow are churches where people meet socially and to share faith together.

To share faith, we need understand our faith. The diocese of Lichfield runs various courses, notably The Bishop's Certificate, which is a prelude to further ministry qualifications. When I arrived here four years ago this August, a number of people were taking part in the Certificate, which Noreen was teaching. It's a sign of a healthy church when people want to discover more about their faith. If you are interested in such a course, please let me know before September when the new term begins.

God willing I hope to see our parishes through the challenges of our day until my retirement. My prayer is that the next five years or so will be profitable for Church Growth. This depends upon our expectations as God's people. Are we willing to give of time, talent and money? Are we willing to face changes and let go that which we love in order to reach out to those outside our church buildings? Or do you wish the parish church to be a museum of past glory – beautiful like a stately home – but out of touch with how people live their lives today?

Touch base with Jesus and you come to the heart of the universe – mysterious, powerful, exciting and yet personal. Jesus made the mystery accessible to those who felt beyond the reach of God. He was accused of being worldly in terms of his friendships and enjoyment of life. Yet at the same time his teaching and miracles brought people to know the great 'I Am' revealed to Moses (Exodus 3:14). To follow Jesus is the greatest experience we can have in this world – it's also the only guarantee of life in the next world. Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13:8) but he spoke and acted in his culture and we must find ways of doing the same if we are to follow him.

Here's wishing you all a pleasant and hopefully warm summer.

David

DRAYCOTT SUMMER FAYRE

Undoubtedly the best village and church fete I have experience anywhere, the Draycott Fayre takes place this month on Ford's field on the Uttoxeter Road in Draycott. On Saturday the 10th there will a live band, bar and refreshments. The main fete is on Sunday the 11th with the usual vintage cars, tractors, engines, arena events, Punch and Judy, rides including Quad Bikes, the Trent Valley Tribal Dancers (who are performing later that afternoon in Stoke and later in Reading!!!). There will also be a Car Boot Sale.

Details will be advertised in plenty of time. PLEASE COME AND SUPPORT – The future of St Margaret's depends upon the success of this weekend!

The Bishop of Liverpool on the importance of Faith in our society

The Rt Revd James Jones, bishop of Liverpool has been a long time campaigner for values that will protect our society and the world. He is a leading campaigner on Green issues, but in the Daily Telegraph in late May he wrote concerning faith:

'Some public bodies try to marginalise Christianity as just one religion in a plural society. This is to fly in the face of our history and constitution. It also ignores the wishes of faith communities whose leaders value the Church's role as defender of faith in the public realm.

What is it that makes us essentially British? It is our landscape, language, literature, learning, laws and liberty. These and our monarchy are our heritage. The genius of any civilisation is the way its heritage adapts to new insights and cultural influences. We need to recognise how – from our landscape, stone-studded with 13,000 churches and cathedras, to our literature, infused with biblical imagery – this heritage has been shaped by the Christian faith. To forget this, either wilfully or by default, will produce a cultural amnesia that leaves us without a compass as we negotiate the future.’ (The Daily Telegraph May 20th)

Jedi Knights – a rising ‘religion’?

According to recent statistics on religion in the UK religious affiliation figures are:

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| Christian | 37 million |
| Islam | 1.5 million |
| Hindu | 552,000 |
| Sikh | 329,000 |
| Jewish | 260,000 |
| Jedi Knight | 390,000 |

Jedi Knights are based upon the characters in the Star Wars movies – it seems nonsense to me to allow a hobby to be classed as a religion – which by definition would imply engagement with a spirit being through prayer or sacrifice. The interesting feature of these statistics is the small number of members of other faith groups in numerical terms, when they seem to have a high profile through in our society – because they truly practice their faith perhaps?

Are there really only 260,000 practising Jews? Should the Christian figure more honestly reflect the fact that only 13% of declared Christians actually worship with a church on a regular basis (and that’s ALL Christian denomination!).

As I’ve said before, if people do not use support their faith, they will lose their place of worship – the writing is on the wall for small churches like St Margaret’s unless truly supported by the community.

David