

Wednesday 19th August 2020

Dear Friends

It was lovely to be back in St Godwald's on Sunday morning! Thank you to everyone who came, everyone who helped, and everyone who joined us online. We are finding a way to live with this virus and, as the newsletter shows this week, we have a programme of worship planned for September that feels more like 'normal' than we've known since March.

On Sunday an exciting piece of news was announced by +John that has already been shared with PCC and DCC members but which I would now like to share more generally. Subject to consultation and the amendment of the legal documents that govern the Bromsgrove Team, the benefice of Stoke Prior, Wychbold and Upton Warren will be joining us next summer. At the same time, we hope that Dodford will formally join the team too.

At present these three communities form part of Wyn Beynon's family of churches and are part of Droitwich Deanery. All changes next year however, as it is planned for these communities to move from Droitwich to join the existing Bromsgrove Deanery (which will be renamed 'Redditch and Bromsgrove') on 1 January. Then in June Wyn retires and it is planned that Paula Honniball, a non-stipendiary priest who is joining Wyn's team this Advent, will take over and become a Team Vicar alongside Bev and Ray. None of this is as complicated as it sounds!

Although this means a significant expansion of the Team, the logic of including these three communities in Bromsgrove is very strong. For instance, Finstall Parish was carved out of Stoke Prior Parish originally, and these three communities 'look towards' Bromsgrove more naturally than towards Droitwich. It will take time to work out the details over the coming months. If you can spot any implications that perhaps need consideration – the size of the PCC comes to mind for instance – then please raise them with me.

This week I am taking two funerals of people with past associations with St Godwald's. Allan Sloan (91) and Carol Street (53) were both – in their respective childhood generations – members of the choir. It is testament to the impact that childhood association with the life of the church has upon our youngsters that, come the most significant life event of all, there is a strong desire on the part of their families to reconnect with the continuity that faith represents.

I often worry about the future of the church when there are so few of the younger generations amongst us. I know I am not alone in this. At the same time, I acknowledge that all of us had to discover faith for ourselves and for many this meant some time 'in the wilderness'. The length of that time has grown as organised faith has fallen in popularity (though let us acknowledge too that the errors of the church have contributed significantly to this as well).

The real danger we face now as churches, is that there are few, (and with the virus there are none) natural ways in to church life for families. Our children's ministry has ceased. Our Open the Book teams cannot go into school, our clergy cannot take assemblies, our pre-school children's activities have ceased... For the present all we have is baptisms, and there are currently very few enquiries for those either. We don't even have social and fundraising activities that can show people in our community the ordinary, friendly faces that constitute the church.

This is a grave issue. To use a commercial analogy, without a pipeline there are no sales. Without a children's ministry, there is no church – not even a church for the bereaved to reconnect with.

So, this is the area of ministry to which I am going to turn my prayer efforts towards and to which I encourage you to turn your prayers towards too.

I have no obvious solutions up my sleeve. We cannot finance our way out of this – i.e. recruit a children's minister. I cannot see at first glance how to reduce clergy workloads to create space and energy for new initiatives. I look around our congregations and I do not see available resources either.

But there is a solution if we are wise enough to spot it. We simply have to discern God's will. Like some other aspects of our common life, this particular challenge may be calling us to live our ministry less in our individual church districts and more in our 'team parish'. That doesn't suddenly make this someone else's challenge to solve for us, but it does widen the conversation. What I am sure of, is that one excellent children's ministry is worth much more than six attempts to do something. Please join me in prayer on this one.

May God's love be poured out afresh for you each day this week,

With every blessing:
David Ford, Rector