

Wednesday 11th November 2020

Armistice Day

Dear Friends

I must admit that I spent most of last week on my phone, tracking the US election results.

My first degree was in politics and I specialised in US political history and systems. My Dad was also born in New York (the family were half way across the Atlantic in '29 as the crash happened) so I've always felt something of a relationship with the country. Each of the five times I've visited the States I've been reminded of the complexity, beauty, irony, diversity and, perhaps, just weirdness, of the country and its many peoples. I'll never forget the jaw dropping moment I entered a tiny town and saw a missile erected next to the church as if it were the spire. Unlike the euphemistic British, Americans don't hide behind their attitudes and try to dress them up as something other than what they are.

In one sense politics didn't come into the US election; it was certainly not a struggle between left and right as we might understand it here. It was much more a struggle between reasoned debate and hyperbole; between truth and wild assertion; between conversation and shouting. The policies behind the two candidates were hardly mentioned at all; what was at stake was the very nature of political discourse; the ability to engage and to listen; the ability perhaps to hear something from an opponent and recognise that it is worth hearing...

The victor this week then, is not a party or a candidate but the process of politics. Regardless of our party-political views this is something to celebrate. It is also something that the church needs to reflect upon for itself. Sometimes the Christian message can come across so assertively that it feels aggressive to those hearing it for the first time. "Jesus loves you" is not a warm message if it's being shouted at you through a loud hailer.

Evangelism is important because unless we share the good news people are not going to hear it. The manner of our evangelising matters though. However certain we are of our message (and there are questions about that of course) pummeling people into submission to accept it is the behaviour of a sect not a church. The church has sufficient confidence in its message and the work of the Holy Spirit to sow seeds and let God do the watering. The US Election can teach us this much. Conversation is so much more fruitful than dictat.

Changing tack for a moment, I hope this second lockdown (has anyone coined it 'lockdown lite' yet?) is treating you well. It feels harder as the days shorten but we've also got used to it a little and so know how to live within necessary constraints.

One of these, of course, is that we are back to 'zoom' only worship for a while. Our national church leaders are trying to change the government's perception that worship is a 'leisure' activity and thereby allow churches to open again. We will certainly activate the telephone trees if this happens. Zoom will continue though for those who need it or prefer it.

By the time you read this, Diocesan Synod will have met to agree the Diocesan budget for 2021. Depending on the drop in parish share receipts next year the Finance office is expecting a deficit at the end of 2021 between £1.24m and £1.9m. This is assuming a drop of between 20-50% in parish share receipts.

I don't know how these figures are reached because the finance office hasn't asked incumbents to provide projections. What I do know is that it will be more difficult for us to pay share in 2021 than it has been in 2020. This is because some of our share payments this year have come out of reserves and we simply cannot allow our reserves to keep dropping to a level lower than that required by the Charity Commission for operational viability (3-9 months of expenditure).

This is not a request from me for more contributions towards parish share. So many of you are so generous already. It is simply right that I share with you some of the challenges coming up. I sincerely hope that the Church Commissioners who are sitting on £5billion of reserves will start to help cover the cost of 'ordinary' parish ministry in a way they haven't for a generation. As we are all fond of saying, if that money is being kept for a rainy day, it is now pouring!

Whilst those big debates take place, we get on with the day to day business of caring for our congregations, our buildings and the wider community. Together we do that brilliantly; thank you for all the hidden pastoral care that goes on to keep our bodies and minds together.

May you know God's love and peace this week: every blessing

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