

## Vicar's Report: APCM 2021

As we have all observed, 2020 was a year filled with some completely unimaginable events. The shockwaves of the pandemic will be felt for many years, and the recovery period we are now facing will be slow and difficult. When we look back over the year, we need to do so with two different perspectives: lament and thanksgiving.

We lament the restrictions on the use of our church building and the fact that we had to close our doors. But we also give thanks for the progress we have made with our building plans: the newly lit and redecorated church is looking beautiful, loved and ready for a fresh start as we regather and regroup.

We lament the loss of our regular children's services and activities, and we acknowledge that it has been an incredibly difficult time for children and families. But we also give thanks for what we have been able to do: outdoor forest church services, which have been fun and friendly, and have enabled us to keep in touch with families we do know, and connect with new families too.

We lament the restrictions on our worship activities, and all that had to stop. But we also give thanks for the steady stream of online worship that has sustained us and for our links with Radio Cherwell. We have gained new worshippers through our online services, and rather than being three separate Sunday congregations we have become one congregation with a single shared message for the week.

We lament the fact that we have not been able to welcome our CS Lewis pilgrims to church, due to all the restrictions. But we also give thanks for our strengthened links with the Kilns, the Soul Space episodes focused on CS Lewis, and the filming for the *Most Reluctant Convert*, which will raise the profile of our church and its importance in the life of this great Christian writer and apologist.

We lament the fact that many of our usual fundraising activities—like the fete and Christmas event— could not take place. But we also give thanks for the huge progress we have made with fundraising for the building project, raising over £100,000 in grant money last year. I would especially like to thank the Friends of Holy Trinity for supporting this first phase of building work so generously. Our parish finances have weathered the storm of the pandemic and have remained stable. I would like to thank each and every one of you who contribute financially to the running of our parish and to our building plans. We simply couldn't have got this far without you.

In this litany of lament and thanksgiving, there are some seeds that have been sown even in this time of adversity.

- A sense of love for our church building—and, relating to this, a sense that we would love to welcome more people through the physical doors of our church. How can our refreshed church building offer the many people who pass through our churchyard a space to meet, stop, pray, reflect and simply rest awhile?

- A sense that our outdoor spaces are worth cultivating and developing: we have all benefited from a closer connection to nature—God’s creation—over the past year, and we have become even more aware of our environmental responsibilities. I think the woodland area is a space we should continue to use for worship, and what an amazing opportunity for us to develop our links with the local foundation school too.
- A sense that we would like to continue with online worship and that this has a pastoral function in being able to reach people who would not otherwise be able to get to church; and an evangelistic function, in broadening the audience of our Sunday worship and helping people to hear a message of good news to sustain them in anxious times. I sense we want to continue our online services in the future.
- A sense that our connections with CS Lewis, his writings and ideas, are important and worthy of further development—for young and old alike—as we reflect on his continuing legacy in the life of our church.
- A sense that external funders are impressed with our building plans, and that we need a renewed focus on fundraising to help us reach our final target so we can complete the project.

While it is so important to lament and confront all we have lost, and many of us will be looking back with a sense of longing for the past, I think God is asking us to look forwards, not back, and allow these seeds to continue to grow. There won’t be room for them to grow if we try to go back and restart everything we used to do. That’s not to say we won’t restart the things we used to do, but it is to say that we need more time to reflect and pray together about how we think God is speaking to us through this pandemic, and how things might need to change.

Between now and at least September, I would like us to hold a space for further reflection, conversation, discussion and consultation, hearing your views on the best way forwards from here, and how we might allow these seeds to grow. I would like that consultation to include all of you—all 160 or so of us on the electoral roll—but I would also really like to talk to some of the other 11,000 souls who live in our parish and for whom Holy Trinity is also their parish church.

I think need to make a slow, still and gradual recovery from this pandemic—for the sake of everyone’s wellbeing, mine included. I think we need to look to the future, not the past. I think we need to nurture the seeds that have been sown over the past year, and allow space for them to grow. I think we need to ask ourselves: who isn’t currently part of this conversation, and how can we include them? And I think we need to set aside conscious and intentional time to pray for the wisdom and guidance of the Holy Spirit. As the prophet Isaiah writes: “See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland.” (Isaiah 43.19). Even as we lament the past year, let us also give thanks for the new things that God is doing in the life of our parish church.

Revd Dr Laura Biron-Scott

## **Closing Prayer**

God of our pilgrimage,

As we reflect on the challenging year that has passed

We give thanks for your continued care of our church community.

We acknowledge all the changes we have faced—unplanned and unwanted – and we lament the things we have lost.

We acknowledge your gentle and loving presence working through this most difficult of times to bring a sense of unity and connectedness; a sense that we are all in this together; an increased sense of compassion for one another and all created beings.

Guide us now by your Spirit as we move forwards in a spirit of faith and trust.

confident of your purposes for us,

bold in proclaiming the good news of your love for us,

better equipped as a church to reach out in love to all in our community

and with hearts prepared to face the changes you may be asking of us.

May we know you more clearly; love you more dearly

And follow you more nearly, day by day.

Through Christ our Lord.

Amen.