

1. A Tale of two vicars

Last autumn I was a member of the small working group which undertook a review of the plans for a church room extension here at St Christopher's; our brief was to give some feedback to our PCC which would help it to decide how to proceed: after all, the building project had been on the cards for many years, and all agreed it was high time either to move it forward, or finally to lay it aside. To help our thinking, we visited a number of churches who had faced a similar question, and had proceeded with building work. One day we visited two rural churches, quite near to each other. At the first one, we met with a lively group of church members, who had overseen the building of a kitchen, toilet, and meeting area: they cheerfully told us that the plans had only really got off the ground once the vicar had got out of the way – by moving on. We then visited the second parish, where it was the vicar himself who welcomed us. Now, this vicar was a one-man buildings powerhouse! The builders were still on site, and he kept breaking off from our conversation to direct some practical matter with them: and it soon became clear that he had clearly been equally forthright when it came to persuading the congregation to go ahead with the work in the first place!

2. Buildings and 'Building'

Two contrasting scenarios, regarding the role played by the vicar in a church building project. Which begs the question; which of those vicars am I?!

Well, neither, to be honest! But I can probably better answer the question of where I stand by quoting from my contribution to our recent Church Annual Meeting.

I believe that this is not a time to live off the past, but to build for the future. Now, you will instantly think of our church building, and our current process of discernment on the right way forward! Well, it could include that kind of 'building' – and maybe it will – but not necessarily. What it definitely will include, though, is building up our church in faith, in commitment, in numbers, in effectiveness, in confidence. This will mean:

- *each member responding to God and daily deepening their knowledge of him;*
- *each member discovering, and being willing to use in our Christian ministry and mission, the unique gifts which God has given them;*
- *investing effort and resources in our outreach and evangelism;*
- *investing in the Christian nurture of our young people, growing up as Christians in a very challenging environment;*
- *becoming a people for whom it is ever more natural to invite friends along – to church, or to explore faith;*
- *becoming a congregation of generous givers, so that our ministry is not hampered through lack of resources;*
- *finding more ways to share the love of Christ through loving service in our community;*
- *finding more ways to make a difference not only within the boundaries of our lovely parish, but well beyond them.*

I don't like to talk of us leaving a 'legacy' in our time to the generations in Pott Shrigley Church who will follow us: 'legacy' can very easily mean 'vanity project' – wanting to be remembered with admiration for what we leave behind us. But I *do* believe that each generation in the church is called faithfully to build for the future:

we can be grateful for what our predecessors have bequeathed to us – and I have just shared with you what I would like to bequeath to those who follow us.

So, if you are asking me today, David, do you think we should go ahead with the building project, then I have to respond; ‘Only if it enables us to do the real building, the ‘spiritual’ building, of the church here’. There are many examples around of churches which have excellent facilities, but who are struggling, declining, nearly empty, or who have just lost their way: and there are also churches who have managed grow, to build, in numbers and in faith, despite less than perfect facilities. In fact, I would cite the recent history of this very church as a good example of that.

So, if it was a *choice* between building spiritually, or building with stones and mortar, there’s no question which we should choose. But it is not bound to be an ‘either/or’. What if we were to find that, to move forward and grow as a church in the present time, we were constantly held back by facilities which were adequate in the past, but which no longer are? Conversely, what if we were to do the work, only to find that they didn’t really significantly help our mission and ministry in the way we had hoped – leaving us with little more than a white elephant, and having taken valuable energy away from the real, the spiritual, building work into the bargain?

In this sermon, as much as answers, I intend to offer you some questions to reflect on, to help you in your own thinking, and praying. And so the first one is this:

Would our building plan significantly increase our ability to do the *real* business of church? Outreach, Pastoral Care, Spiritual Growth and the like? Or would it take place at the *expense* of those things?

3. God will guide

Actually, not even the wisdom of Solomon could give a fully confident answer to that question. We can never really know how things will work out. So, isn’t it a good thing that God *does* know what is right for us!? This is why the PCC, wardens, and I have made prayer the greatest single priority in this process of decision. What is *God’s* will? Well, we need to ask him, we need to wait on him, we need to listen, we need to hear - and we need to obey.

Sounds simple, doesn’t it? What we’re talking about here is the business of ‘Guidance’, God guiding our decisions – whether over something really big, in our own lives, or our church’s, or over smaller, day-to-day matters.

But I have found guidance a challenge for my entire Christian life - and I know I’m not alone in that. A good example is the times when Kim and I have made the momentous, life-changing decision to take up a new role in a new place. It has happened six times – more, if you include the occasions where the decision was *not* to accept. Without fail, we have found ourselves at the deadline for decision without any great clarity, pro or con – and the decision has felt like a step in the unknown. We would long for clarity, and it was simply not there. Nevertheless, we believed as an article of faith that God *was* guiding us – even if it didn’t feel like it. And, sure enough, *afterwards*, once the step had been made, we could see that indeed He was – that the step we took without that feeling of certainty *did* turn out to be the right one; God had been in the process, and had guided us exactly where he wanted us. Invariably, in the ensuing days, months and years we had confirmation after confirmation that it was so.

Actually, Pott Shrigley was going to be different. After a career’s-worth of nerve-shredding, 11th-hour, Brexit-style decisions, this was to be our last move – and we definitely weren’t going to make it unless God really *did* give us, this time, an unequivocal answer that it was right. The trouble is....he still didn’t! Sure, we loved the place, the people we met, and all that we heard about the church. But did that mean we were the right people to come here? On that key question the hoped-for clarity never came: and once again we took the decision to

come without it. And once again God has subsequently made it patently clear that we were indeed making the right decision!

Of course, we're all different, and God deals with us differently. I have known many people who have experienced much more tangible and clear guidance – and that includes some of you: perhaps you're just better at listening! But really, *how* God guides is not as important as the fact that he *does* guide. Moreover, this corporate decision, to be taken by our PCC, but with input we hope from the whole Church, involves God speaking to us as a whole community, not just as individuals. But my own experience has been that guidance doesn't come in the way we want, but in the way God wants; and also that he will involve us in the process, using our own judgement to weigh things up, and then trusting that God is guiding our steps even as we step out apparently totally in the dark.

I was humbled when a church member sent me some words from the Church in North Korea – surely the most difficult place in the world to be a Christian, let alone to come together and function as a church: they wrote that, whenever they planned to undertake a church project, before deciding on it, leaders and members would undertake a significant period of fasting and prayer. Yes, a lot is at stake for us – too much to make the wrong decision: but there are Christian brothers and sisters who have much, much more at stake than we do – and yet who still learn to trust God for guidance.

And can I add one other insight I have gained? It's what I have learnt to call 'God's fingerprints'. Before the decision to move here – and the previous one to move to Suffolk – Kim and I came across a handful of uncanny co-incidences in connection with the place we were considering moving to. The detail of them is not important, but suffice to say they were enough to make us stop and ask the question; Is this God's way of giving us a gentle sign that, despite appearing silent, he is actually very much in this process with us? - of saying, 'Look, it might feel like I'm not guiding you, but my fingerprints are all over this if you have eyes to see them!'

And so, my second question:

Are you really praying for God's guidance – not just paying lip service to the idea of praying? And are you looking at the facts in order to make judgements to the best of your ability, to play your own part in the process of guidance? (And can you spot any of God's fingerprints....?).

4. Costly commitment

Let's move to another area, that of cost. I think most people would agree that, if the extension could suddenly appear, instantaneously, and free-of-charge, they'd be very happy to have it. To that degree, most, even all, are in favour. It was certainly the conclusion of the working group that it was desirable, if possible, to proceed, as the room would bring benefits which couldn't be achieved in any other way – mainly because of the lack of space in our existing building.

The problem comes when we weigh up the cost, and decide if it is viable – or even responsible – for our small church community to take on that burden; and also if it is worth it. Jesus told a parable of a man who set out to build a tower without first working out if he had what was needed to complete the job: if he didn't then he risked being a laughing stock – the man with the half-finished tower. Although Jesus was using this as a spiritual metaphor, it is certainly applicable: it would be bad stewardship to set out with no more than a blithe assumption that 'it will all sort itself out'. We have to be honest about what we would be taking on: for various technical reasons, it is quite a tricky job, which could throw up unforeseen costs, over and above any initial estimates. In the early years of the plan, a legacy was covering most of the expected cost: we still have those reserves, but they have been seriously nibbled away at to meet various ongoing costs – not least in the last couple of years – and would no longer be sufficient by themselves. More funds would be needed. Interestingly,

one church which was on our list of possible visits, when I called asking to come and view their extension, said, 'There is no extension: in the end we never went ahead – we just didn't feel it was viable financially'.

On the other hand, if, as we wait on God, in prayer and faith, he engenders in us a sense of vision and calling for this project – well, I fully believe that that same sense of vision and belief will move us all to give, and that, through this and other means, God really will provide what we need – as he has promised he will. In our second reading today we saw Mary, in an act of reckless generosity, pour literally at Jesus feet the most valuable possession she had – 'a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard' (worth, as the calculating and corrupt Judas observed, 'a year's wages'). I believe that God, if he guides us to proceed, will also move us and others to similar generosity, to release those resources which he has entrusted to us – our treasure, talents and time – to see the project through.

So, another question:

If we went ahead, would you be willing to be generous? And would you be willing to do so, if God guided the PCC to go ahead, *even if your own view had not been in favour of doing so?*

5. The way forward

I must admit, I'm daunted by the idea of going ahead. I've never really been a 'buildings man'. It would be costly in terms of all the effort and upheaval it would entail, to say nothing of the finance. But I also really value the building we have inherited from faithful predecessors, and recognize that we in our time have our own responsibility. Indeed, we would still need to consider other ways to make our facilities as fit for purpose as we can: so the challenge does not go away - we will still face the question as to what we should do. And, on that too, we will all have different ideas and opinions, and we will continue to seek God's will, and to be open as to what might be required. And a building must never become an idol: we must treat it with respect and care, but ultimately, it is there to serve God's purposes and God's people in their work and witness – not the other way round!

I'm sure that, with insights shared by the whole church community, and with God's guiding hand, our PCC will make the right decision. It may be to go ahead; in which case, many challenges lie ahead. Or it may be to put the extension plans aside: and if that is the decision, I hope it will not be because we want an easier life, but because we intend to put that same effort, sacrifice, giving and commitment to the ministry and mission of today's church, so that we can truly 'build for the future'.

I've entitled this sermon, What Really Matters?, because that seems to be the question behind each of our Bible Readings. It's also the question which we should always have in mind as a church. Mary showed that she knew that Jesus mattered more than anything else. St Paul had many concerns in his work as an apostle and as a builder of the early church – he was constantly confronted by questions far more tricky than those currently facing us. And he didn't duck them either. But he made sure that he never lost sight of what mattered most, that thing which must always be at the centre; knowing Jesus:

I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things..... in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him.

May Jesus always be at the centre of St Christopher's, and of all that we do.

David Swales