Living in the present moment

It’s a tired old cliché of the way in which we experience the passage of time as we get older, that it seems to pass ever more quickly with the passing years. A tired old cliché it certainly is, but it is very much the case that Judy and I can scarcely believe that we’ve just passed the eleventh anniversary of our coming here to St Neots. Eleven years is a significant length of time in anyone’s life, and it is in fact the longest that we have lived in any one place as a married couple. A lot has happened in that time in the life of the church, and a lot has happened in our lives too. But it still seems at times to be just the twinkling of an eye; still seems to be no time at all since I was the new vicar who didn’t know any of you, or you me; no time at all since I had to ask ‘is this the way that we do it here?’ over and over again.

These past eleven years have been times of change and development. When I arrived, the new Love’s Farm housing development had only just begun, and was stalled due to the banking crisis of 2008/9. When Round House School opened in September 2009, it had no children; by the end of the first term there were ten, from just three families. For quite a long time now, the school has been at its capacity of 420 children, and the first new building on the Wintringham side of Cambridge Road will be a new primary school to cope with the ever increasing demand on primary school places. Led by our then curate, Sarah Gower, we started Café Church, once a month on a Sunday afternoon. This developed ecumenically, and from it a bid was formulated for funding from the United Reformed Church for a five-year pioneer minister post. Helene Tame joined us in 2014 and has built up Love’s Farm Church to the point where 60+ people, children and adults, worship at Breakfast Church every Sunday, with other activities, worship focused and community action projects flowing from it.

Back here in town, we have engaged in outreach into the community. We were part of the consortium of churches that set up the Foodbank more than five years ago and along with representatives of all the churches, we are involved in its management and upkeep. Social outreach, particularly to the homeless and vulnerable, is a vital strand of our Development Action Plan, and we have been running Friday Food now for over eight months. I am thrilled that so many want to be part of this venture, and thrilled too that out of it, we are not just sharing the good fortune that God has given us, but helping to create a sense of community for those who come. This is all on top of lots of things like the Christian Care Centre and our Christian Aid fundraising that have been happening for many years, and have continued and adapted during the time we’ve been here with you.

Last month I wrote about looking to the future. Of course, the future is always uncertain. We make plans, but we can’t foresee exactly how things will turn out, and from time to time things happen, people come and go, that mean we have to look to the future, trusting in God’s guidance and his constant presence with us, as we come to a time when the way things have always been can no longer be the touchstone for how things will carry on. It’s a good time to remind ourselves of a two essential things about our life of Christian discipleship and witness.

So let’s remind ourselves first that the church is not the building or the institution. The church is the people of God, the Body of Christ. The church is us, and those to whom we minister by reaching out with the love of Christ which, as we reminded ourselves in Holy Week and Easter, means giving not less than everything.

And let’s remind ourselves secondly, that while it’s good to reflect on what is past, not nostalgically, but with a resolve to celebrate and retain what has been good while embracing what we need to do and be; and while it’s good to look to the future, to make plans and formulate strategies so that our life of service is fresh and relevant, we absolutely must not forget that the only place where we actually live is not the past or the future. The place we inhabit, where we are truly ‘People fully alive’, the place where God is at work within us, is and can only be the present moment. The present moment is the only time that exists. The past is gone, the future is yet to be. The time and the place where we can be alive to the Spirit at work within us, and the Spirit present in the world around us, is now, and it is here. All that we ever do, as disciples of Jesus Christ, as Easter people, is done in the present. And whenever we consent to the presence and the action of God within us and in the world, the present moment comes fully alive. It lives as the active, creative, loving presence of God – the present moment becomes God’s kingdom come on earth. If we grasp this truth, it is the truth from which all others inexorably flow.

Nobody looks forward to saying goodbye, and I’m no exception. Whatever I have been able to do in the time I’ve been with you, has only been possible because of you, in your many and varied ways and I can’t begin to thank you all sincerely for encouraging, resourcing, restoring and perhaps occasionally, putting up, with me.

Judy and I will make our farewells at the 10am Parish Eucharist on Sunday 12 May. I hope that you can be with us then. Please pray for us as we move to Ely. We will pray for you.

Yours ever in Christ, Fr Paul