

Sunday 28th April 2024
The Fifth Sunday After Easter
with the Annual Parochial Church Meeting

Liverpool Parish Church

NT: Acts 8.26-40

NT: I John 4.7-21

Gp: John 15.1-8

Some people find it difficult to say goodbye. Elton John has had at least three 'farewell tours' in his lifetime: his most recent one, "Farewell Yellow Brick Road" began in 2018 and finished in 2023. I am not planning to take that long, but it does feel like it sometimes. I don't want anyone telling me that 'your song' is repetitive! However, since I announced in March that I would be stepping down in June an awful lot has happened, and I am also busy planning events for the rest of the year at St Nick's, after I have gone.

In this farewell tour, one of the themes is noting just how many people and organisations have a relationship with this Church. As we hold our Annual Parochial Church Meeting today, it seems a good moment to recognize that, and perhaps also celebrate it as a feature of St Nick's. Of course all churches should have links with the community around them – although you would be surprised at the number which don't – but here we prioritise our relationships outside the building. We know that these relationships enable us to have more impact in signposting the presence of Christ in the city than if we confine our preaching to the pulpit inside our doors. So, although my farewell tour began with a bit of a media storm, it has really been about people all over the City contacting me or running into me and telling me their experiences of being at St Nick's during the last decade. Some have been at civic or military events, and some have been partners in the charity sector; some have been people who have come into church on their own, looking for something they were missing, and some have been people who have had family occasions here. A lot of our City's politicians have spoken to me, recognising the work we do here which connects all of our communities, and some people have also expressed to me that St Nick's is, for them, a 'safe' place, where they feel unencumbered by the baggage which surrounds many churches and institutions.

Our Gospel reading today is, unusually, a passage on which I have not yet preached in my ten years at St Nick's. It is, of course, one of Jesus' 'I AM' sayings: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who

abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” It is not terribly profound to say that this reading is about interconnectedness, but there is something in this line about faith and identity being visible in our relationships.

As the church prepares for what I hope will be a short vacancy, I hope that we are in a position to flourish without a Rector. It absolutely should not be the case that the church slows down or even stops when there is no incumbent, but rather that it continues to develop, and the next Rector of Liverpool will jump on board at the point you are then, and not now. At various times in the last ten years the Parochial Church Council has worked on its vision and strategy, and I encourage you to read the document which you can download from the website, because it captures our corporate understanding of who we are and what we do. The values identified by the PCC and focused on Jesus Christ are: inclusive welcoming; serving; ethical compassion; and joyful hope. And that joyful hope is important: although it started as words scribbled on a post-it note on a piece of flip-chart paper (or something like that, anyway), the description which the PCC gave to it is this: “The joyous hope we proclaim should be active, creative, and dynamic, focused on allowing God’s people to flourish in their lives.” This joyous hope is not something which we are looking for just within the church congregation, but it is part of what we are offering to the City around us.

As the Parochial Church Council agrees the wording of the Parish Profile, which is part of the suite of documents which will be used to lure someone here to be Rector of Liverpool, they must put together a document which truly reflects who we are as a church. When I left my last parish, I encouraged them only to use photographs in the Parish Profile which were less than a year old. There is no point trying to sell ourselves by what we were two years ago or five years ago, but rather what we will be in the future. ‘Joyous hope’ is about now and also the future, and the relationships which we have in our Parish are about now and the future. Ultimately, any faith in Jesus Christ has to be about now and the future, and never the past.

In the coming interregnum, I encourage everyone to be supportive of those who have taken on extra duties or responsibilities. Clergy are not indispensable, but they do occasionally do some useful jobs around the place, and other people will have to add more to already busy lives. I encourage you to keep

pushing the Church forward, so that the Church which a new Rector joins is not the same as the Church which I leave in June. But most of all I encourage you to keep coming, keep attending, keep giving (in every way), and keep flourishing together in joyful hope.

Now, I emphasise that attendance is important because it is very easy to think that you are not important, perhaps that people do not notice whether or not you are there. This is not the case, and the reason for this is picked up not just in our Gospel reading, but also in our second reading today. We heard this: “God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.” Whilst we use the analogy of the vine to reach out our branches even further, the interconnectedness in the First Letter of John is also about God abiding in us, as we abide in him. That is to say, our community of faith is strengthened by each of us – not as a numerical addition, but as individuals. The character, the faithfulness, and the strength of our community abides in each of us and is strengthened by each of us.

This Annual Meeting is unusual because we know that the Church is heading towards new and exciting times, but my report – given in this sermon – is in fact the same as every year, because I want to celebrate who we are and what we have achieved together in the last year. Jesus said, “I am the vine, you are the branches,” and it is these words which describe our ministry here at St Nick’s. Anyone who has ever owned a vine knows that they just keep growing, and that is my charge to you for the future.

Fr Crispin Pailing