

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

We are at a really exciting time in the life of our church and in the life of the church year.

Last Thursday we celebrated Ascension and entered the period we have now come to know as Thy Kingdom Come.

Next Sunday is Pentecost when we celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and upon the followers of Jesus.

It is the time of year when we celebrate the gift of the Holy Spirit which fires us up, empowers us, nudges us, whispers and encourages us.

So it feels a wonderful time for us to be considering as a church **where** it is that we believe God to be calling us to be **both as individuals and as a church community**.

Two years ago our then Rector John Chambers was getting ready to retire. This meant a combination of things....

1. The knowledge that there would be changes ahead.
2. The importance of keeping things afloat.
3. The importance of not just keeping things afloat but also move forward in vacancy.

Rev John's retirement meant that we had to start the process of pulling together a document which would be the equivalent of a selling document and a job advert!

So, one of the first things we did when we went into vacancy was to gather all the facts and figures about our churches, but also gather information about where we believed we were as a church and where we prayed we should be in the future.

In our brochure we said that we valued our church for its "fellowship, family and friendship"; and for the way "we all journey together".

We said that we felt we were good at –

- Being a welcoming church
- Introducing new and imaginative services and meetings
- Music and bells
- Lay involvement through various teams
- Integrating with the community and civic authorities.

But we also said that we have challenges –

- Deepening our understanding of our faith and building up our spirituality
- Not enough young families
- Carrying our mission further into the community
- Becoming more confident in sharing our faith in Jesus and commending his way of life
- Growing our already good choir and expanding our more informal singing group
- Encouraging more participation in our church services from our C of E primary school and SFX school
- The lack of a room or hall for meetings
- New building?
- Major rearrangement of the church building?
- Use of a nearby building?

So, none of what we're going to be talking about this morning is new – it's part of a process that started at least a couple of years ago.

(PAUSE)

Having produced our brochure, the process continued and you know we were delighted to appoint and install Martin as our Rector just over a year ago.

With a short vacancy we were ready to keep going!

(PAUSE)

The PCC held an Away Day last November in the beautiful prayerful surroundings of Marrick Priory and in the presence of Bishop Helen-Ann.

We spent the day looking at –

1. Where do we as a church need to be?
2. How would we get there?
3. The need for a vision and a strategy for growth
4. We also talked about our aims for 2019 and beyond.

We said that if we don't have a vision and a strategy then we would be adopting a scattergun approach to everything – and that would **never** be effective.

If we are not realistic as a church about what our strengths and weaknesses are, then we don't know what resources we have available to us to move forward.

We agreed that the strengths we stated in the brochure were true and fair.

And likewise with our weaknesses.

But we also recognised that we had opportunities – we could look at

- Reordering our church building
- Developing community links
- The parish church being a supporter/leader of existing town initiatives
- Re-establishing of Churches Together in Richmond
- The enlargement of benefice/deanery could provide the opportunity to resource other churches
- Developing the ideas for and of younger people

And threats –

- Finance (is always tricky)
- Aging congregation
- Perceptions of how our community sees St Mary's – perhaps indifference towards/lack of ownership by the community
- The accessibility of services/building – are we hard to access both liturgically and physically – eg language of services – hill and doors up and into church
- The enlargement of benefice/deanery could mean more pull on current resources

So what we needed was a way to maximise the strengths and opportunities and a way to work on the weaknesses and threats.

We agreed that

1. None of this is achievable without the desire for growth, the discernment of God's will and prayer – as Dean John said at Café Church – the growth of a church is only achieved via the growth in spirituality of its members. A wise man said “Don't build bigger than the prayer foundations”.
2. We would embark on a programme of growth with the assistance of a task group (Parish Development Group) which would work on the initial findings and then give the PCC some steer.

It was felt at the PDG and PCC that nobody works well in isolation and that if we are to succeed as a church within our community within our deanery within our diocese then we need to try and dovetail what we are doing so that the church can support the deanery and diocese and vice-versa.

Bishop John was very helpful in giving us a suggestion for a model of how we could move forward effectively in church growth and spiritual health. It's a bit like a swimming model - and goes a bit like this - All the parts working together and provided they work together smoothly and well then we don't swim round in circles!

The Parish Development Group felt that we needed a message in our pocket to remind us what it is that we are here for – what we are aspiring to be – and so they came up with a line which the PCC approved and which we are beginning to weave into conversations etc

TO BE A PEOPLE AND A PLACE WHERE LOVE WORKS

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Just a few weeks ago we spent a short but positive Away morning at Marrick Priory; a morning rooted in prayer and conversation. We used the “hot off the press” Diocesan strategy and the growth model which +John gave us and in teams we looked at the areas which we felt we should be focussing on in order that we could really be working towards being that people and a place where love truly works.

This is what we came up with –

We agreed that within **Our Purpose of Worship and Prayer** we would like to

- Review our service pattern and aim to have a better integration between our various congregations.

As part of Outreach and Evangelism we would like to

- Use Holy Trinity more (for a range of services/events/activities for people of all ages – youth groups, services for people who struggle to access ST M etc)
- Reach out to young people, using a range of services
- Promote to the wider community the church as a meeting place

As part of Outreach – Community service we would like to

- Use Holy Trinity for social welfare initiatives and investigate our use of the curtilage (eg Men’s Sheds, soup kitchens)
- Build links with active local agencies
- Give St Mary’s a presence at the Christmas Market
- Look at providing a Christmas Day dinner in town

As part of Growth – Discipleship and Pastoral Care we would like to have

- More study groups (consider timings/group size/venue/topic)
- More Prayer ministry (we have our Prayer Circle and Prayer meetings but there is always scope for more!)
- Better Provision/support for young families – we have Little Rainbows, we have TOAST – what else could we be doing?
- Safeguarding

- Run Listening courses
- Increase St Mary's presence in residential homes
- Hold Welcome events for newcomers

And as part of our Infrastructure – Finance, Fabric, Administration we would look at the

- Structures/systems required
- Finance: stewardship/fund-raising/management are separate activities and each need resourcing
- Fabric: maintenance/fitness for purpose(eg re-ordering)
- Administration: review and resource the whole process

Martin's letter in the latest magazine at the back of church and on the website is exactly about all of this and we would warmly encourage you to read, and consider and pray about it all.

Our gospel reading today talks about making God's love known to others, just as Jesus made his love for God known to his disciples. We can **talk** about love and being a people and a place where love works, **or** we can **truly be** a people and a place where love works.

Our hope as a PCC and ministry team is that we each feel inspired to spend some time this week prayerfully considering where it is that the Holy Spirit is leading us – where it is that you feel that we are being called to be

The questions are

What are we missing?

Where should our priorities lie?

How do we go about it?

And what can **we** do to play **our** part and join in this ongoing evolution of love in action?

Let's pray –

Holy Spirit, sent by the Father,
ignite in us your holy fire;
strengthen your children with the gift of faith,
revive your Church with the breath of love,
and renew the face of the earth,

through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen