

(Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8)

That great act of love from Mary took place, as we heard, six days before the Jewish Passover, the occasion of the Last Supper. Today marks the beginning of Passiontide when our focus turns towards the events and the eternal significance of Jesus' final few days in Jerusalem.

As Jesus was preparing to enter Jerusalem he knew it would be for the last time. So he gratefully receives Mary's anointing, saying – no doubt with much trepidation – 'you will not always have me'. Jesus knew why he would need to die, and in a great act of love, transcending even Mary's generous, extravagant anointing, he was willing to do so in order to save us from ourselves. His Passion, his 'redemptive suffering', was truly for once and for all.

We know that his very name, 'Jesus', is the Greek form of the Hebrew name 'Joshua' which means 'God saves'. So all his life Jesus would have been aware of his primary calling.

Our calling as followers of Jesus, as Christians, is to live his risen life – and through word and action to invite others to do the same. Together, we are the Body of Christ, and it is only right that each year we should come together to examine our fitness for purpose, to review what we have been doing in his name and to plan what we will be doing. That is the function of our Annual Meeting, which will follow the 10am service. I do hope you will be able to stay.

Either way, I hope you have seen our Annual Report. It includes reports on the main areas of our life and work as the parish church of Richmond with Hudswell. They illustrate the range and depth of what we are doing Together, we are making a difference – and together we want to be able to continue to do so.

In my Report I state, '[We are] called to serve a complex community and it is important that in our worship and in our service we all support each other. Our task is to work together for the coming of God's kingdom here on earth, as it is in heaven. We need to grow in confidence so that we can move beyond the essential quality of welcome to outreach: to being an integral part of community life in Richmond and Hudswell.

'For this we need to be people of prayer and study of God's holy word. These disciplines are essential in developing a clear vision for growth along with a viable strategy to help us realise that vision. I am grateful to and for the PCC who are fully engaged with [this] process... In particular, our newly-formed Parish Development Group have made great strides in preparing the ground for us as a parish to move forward.'

That Group is just one of many – along with a large number of individuals – to whom I wish to express my thanks. Time does not permit me to list them now, but I have

done so in my Report. I am deeply grateful to everyone at St Mary's because, to state the obvious, I simply could not function as your Rector without you! Thank you for your support.

So, looking to the future, our PCC will be gathering for an Away Day early next month. They will build on the start made at the last Away Day in November, when we thought about what our Vision for growth should be – and how best to realise that Vision.

Since then, as a church community we have sought to establish a desire for growth – underpinned by deliberately building in that desire to our corporate and individual prayers. I am sure we would all agree that growth is vital for our church, just as it is for any living thing. Unless we grow we fade away! And our church must grow in three dimensions, each interdependent: growth in our numbers, in the maturity of our faith, and in our service to the wider community. Unless we grow in each of these dimensions we will fade away!

We have a new Vision Statement, a summary of who we aspire to be, which is this: *A people and a place where love works*. It's another way of saying that well-known verse from John's gospel: 'God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God lives in them'. So as St Mary's church, our God-given aspiration when gathered in this building and when active in the wider community is to be where love works.

As we have seen in our Annual Report, in many ways this is already true; in others there is still work to be done.

So we must move from where we are to where God is calling us to be. Now, if our Vision Statement is mainly for internal use, reminding us of who we aspire to be, then we might also need a Mission Statement: a short phrase which indicates to everyone else who we are and what we are about. It would be used on letterheads, and on all our publicity materials.

The problem with Mission Statements is that they can quickly go out of date. Our Parish Development Group therefore recommended that we should not have such a statement, and use instead a phrase which is already part of our identity: *Hold on to that which is good*. There it is, in Ruth's Window. And here it is – alongside our logo – on our St Mary's mugs.

Hold on to that which is good conveys a message of forward movement combined with cherishing the values which make us who we are.

But Vision and Mission Statements alone will get us nowhere. The key to realising our Vision is developing a strategy. As Bishop Nick has said, 'Strategy isn't magic; it is the 'plumbing' that gets us from here to where the vision says we need to reach. Ultimately, any strategy has to align as closely as possible to our discernment of God's plan. It needs to be continuously underpinned by prayer.'

So developing a strategy is the next stage of our journey together. At the Away Day our PCC will be looking at the brand-new Diocesan strategy – launched only last month. It offers a framework from which to select the parts which most apply to us. The PCC will also identify a workable number of priority areas for the next 12 months – perhaps no more than three – from which will emerge our next steps on the way to realising our overall Vision.

We must all be involved in this process. Once these priorities have been identified we will all be invited to help define and deliver the specific steps required.

As I have written in my Report,

‘Looking back over the past year, we have a great deal for which to give thanks, so much to celebrate. May this give us confidence as we look to the future, and may we take heart from the assurance [in Isaiah] that, ‘those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.’

May we soar together, seeking God’s will and God’s blessing as with him we build his kingdom here in Richmond and Hudswell.’

Thanks be to God. **Amen.**