

The Parish Church of St. John the Baptist. Fleet Street, Coventry

REVIEW OF THE PARISH 2007/8

given by the Rector, Father Paul Such at Parish Mass, Sunday 20 April 2008

There is an old song that includes the line: 'the times are a changing'. How very true, for our modern society is very different to when I was a boy. If this is true of society in general, then it is certainly true of our parish. In the past, we had healthy finances with good donations being regularly given that enabled us to pay our bills and undertake necessary repairs. Today sadly this is no longer the case. Indeed, as you will hear from our treasurer later at the Annual Meeting, we are in fact bankrupt in that last year we failed to pay our parish share. So with those changes in our fortunes, now come challenges and choices that we must face up to during this coming year. **Two major challenges** face us that we have to confront head on if we are to survive.

As I explained to you last year, the **first challenge** is how to prevent water ingress, for the roof over the Lady Chapel is in a perilous state, all of the down pipes have ceased to work properly and, once the rainwater has reached ground level, it has nowhere to go - with the result that it not only ponds around the church but even flows into the church. Now if this were to happen to your own home, I am sure that you immediately employ workmen to sort the problem out, because we all know how destructive water can be. Indeed, let me be clear about the danger of the present situation: if we just sit back and allow these problems to develop, it will not be long before St. John's is placed on the buildings 'At risk list' which in turn will soon result in the church having to be closed. Yes, the problem is that serious.

Now as I have told you before, the cost of preventing water penetration is £196,955, money that we simply do not have. However, there is a possible bright side to this scenario, for thankfully English Heritage and the Heritage Lottery Fund have offered us a £75,000 grant. However, this money will only be released to us if we raise £93,000. Naturally I am sure that you will argue that a historic building such as ours should be given more money by the government but English Heritage/Lottery have in fact offered us the second highest grant in the Diocese. So rather than grumbling, we should celebrate the offer and enthusiastically work to raise the money.

Our **second challenge** is to put our house in order financially. As you will notice from our accounts, we failed to pay £7,288, a third of our parish share, to the Diocese. This is the first year that we have not paid our way and underlines the fact that the old days, when putting a £1 on the plate was sufficient, are long gone. Over the past five years, the PCC has sought ways in which to reduce our expenditure and has been successful in this - but now there is nothing else we can reduce. So, the only possible way forward is to accept this challenge and increase our individual giving substantially.

So, we have responsibilities for both the care of this building and, as a parish, to pay our way. These challenges therefore bring before us choices. We can of course stick our heads in the sand - but then don't be surprised when the church closes. Or we can prevaricate and talk endlessly about the difficulties - but that too will result in closure. However, there is a positive choice available to us - to commit ourselves to action, and for every member of the congregation to seek ways of working for the parish. Indeed, why should other people and organisations give us money if we are not prepared to help ourselves?

Now if we make the choice to work together, I believe that this parish will be able to meet those challenges. To help us in this task, the PCC has invited the Diocesan Stewardship officer to guide us as we seek Stewardship Renewal within our parish. Such a programme consists of three elements - these being **Time, Talents** and **Giving**.

To take these aspects in order, if each of us gave to God some of our **time**, much more could be achieved in this parish. At present we are relying upon half a dozen people to do all the work. Is it fair that we put upon these few? What happens when they burn out because of our insensitivity and selfishness? Now I have heard some say that they are too busy to help - but then frankly I don't know of anyone who isn't busy. Do you? All of us can find time for God if we want to.

Secondly, each person has a **talent**. Yours may not be in doing DIY jobs around church - but it could be in greeting and welcoming people. Let me give you a few good examples:

- David Bentley has gathered around himself a group of people who open our church as part of our visitor ministry. This is a very important new development - but at present we can only open during the mornings. If more of you gave an hour or two each week to God, we could keep the church open all day and every day. We could then offer the city a lunchtime ministry - perhaps a short service at 1.00 p.m., an organ recital, or soup and a chat. With more of you becoming involved, our church could become the centre for lunchtime events in our city.
- Or what about the splendid work of Zillah and Paul who run a Saturday morning stall - or Joyce with her Saturday stall that, again, raises money for our restoration.
- Then there are the ladies of Meadow House who are an enormous help both in raising money for us through the Christmas and Summer Fairs, as well as helping serve tea and coffee on Saturday morning. You know, without Meadow House's help we would not be able to hold the coffee morning each week and we should thus be grateful for their help. We should therefore celebrate and seek to expand this work.
- Then, the ladies of the Monday craft group who use our hall have started knitting to raise money to repair our clock that we, as a parish, cannot afford to repair. So if you are a knitter, why not join them on a Monday afternoon for a good social time whilst also using your talent to raise money for the church.

All these examples are simple but very effective ways of raising money - and all are examples of people using their talent for God.

So, we should all look at our talents; find ways in which to channel them positively within our parish. Another example must be the administrative work done by Margaret and John Oliver who are an enormous help to me in filling in grant application forms. It is through these applications that we are hoping will raise the money needed to release the English Heritage grant that will enable us to undertake our urgent repair works. Not everyone feels able to undertake administration: but there are other ways in which you can help - just ask. Sharing the load through the use of our talents can be fun too. Just look at the Christmas Fair. This year I was glad that more of us became involved. The result in profits was certainly up - but more interesting is that everyone who helped enjoyed themselves. It was hard work - but every one had a good time. Yes, we should celebrate all our talents and use them for God.

The third aspect we need to concentrate upon is our monetary **giving** to God. If I may repeat myself, in failing to pay a third of our parish share we are admitting that we are bankrupt. To be brutally frank, as Christians we are failing in our duty if we do not tithe our income - or do we just skip over those passages throughout the Bible that speak of our responsibility to tithe our money? God has given us many blessings - but when did you last look at your rise in income and similarly increase your giving to God? Of course I am aware of the financial difficulties we

all face in meeting our bills today - but the church bills are also increasing. If we don't pay our household bills, we know what will happen - if we don't pay our church bills the same thing will happen. If however every member of our congregation tithed, our finances would be much healthier. Now just in case someone doesn't understand what a tithe is, let me explain. The biblical tithe is 10% of our income after tax has been taken off. Yet the Diocese asks us to give only 5% of our income, more if we are able. Is that too much to ask when we consider all the blessings we have received? I think not. In reality this means that anyone receiving £80 per week after tax should be tithing £4 to the church. Or if you receive a £100 a week after tax, you should be giving £5 a week. Now I don't believe in asking anything of you that I would not undertake myself and so let me tell you that I tithe both my stipend and the expenses reimbursed by the parish. Further, if you pay any tax, may I remind you that you can gift aid your donations, provided that the tax reclaimable by the parish does not exceed the amount of tax you pay. This does not cost you a penny more in donation - but does help the parish considerably. So I would ask each of you to celebrate God's blessings to you and then give generously and happily to Him.

This year will be all about facing challenges, making hard choices and deciding what our individual response will be. Yet stewardship renewal must not just be in reaction to the immediate, but so as also to plan for mission and outreach. Our renewal, through increased giving of time, talents and money, must enable us to develop and expand our work within the parish. As your parish priest, I hope you will make a positive response, for we must be about seeking growth in faith and in disciples.

It is my prayer that you will follow the example of Our Lady who answered 'Yes' to the challenge and choice that faced her when asked to respond to with God's request. Indeed, she remained faithful to Our Lord and His call throughout her life, even during the darkest hour as she stood by Him at the foot of the Cross. So when a member of the PCC asks you to be involved in our stewardship renewal, be ready to say 'yes'. When you are asked for your help, be ready to say 'yes'. When you are asked to recommit yourself, be ready to say 'yes'. Renew your commitment to Our Lord through your time, talents and giving. Our Lady put all that she had at the disposal of God - will you?