

The AGM each year gives me a little opportunity to reflect, somewhat at random, on where we are at as a church, and to consider the highs and lows of last year. And also to look forward a little bit to what may happen next year. It is not in any sense intended to be a 'State of the Union' address, and it's certainly no manifesto full of pledges and promises. Fortunately I don't have to stand for election, and I'm obviously safe because Nick Clegg doesn't want to be Rector of Yeovil. Where I feel so sorry for these party leaders is that the whole election seems to have become entirely about their own performance, and I thank God so much that the work of St. John's is simply not all about me. Yes, I have a role that includes leadership, and I believe in leadership in the church, just as Paul did as we see from the Pastoral epistles, and the writer to the Hebrews who says, 'obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.' I believe in church leadership, but of course it is servant leadership that works alongside others, with humility and gentleness, not lording it over others, not forcing its own way. As in all things, Jesus is our model of leadership. He gives strong leadership, but with self-sacrificing love. It's a hard task and I am only too aware of my own inadequacies.

Well, I've grouped my random reflections under various headings, and the first is prayer.

1. Prayer. Prayer is not about twisting God's arm or forcing his hand. But it is about asking him to bless us and our work, to bring people to faith, to build others in their faith, to further the gospel, to protect and provide for us, our people, our families, our church, our mission partners, our town, our nation, our world – and his kingdom. Church life moves forward only by God's grace – we can't build the church and change lives. But God can and we should ask him. Well, like every church minister, I expect, I worry about our prayer life. I worry, because I don't know how much we are praying – so much of it goes on in places that I can't see. I know that some pray every day at home, that some pray with prayer triplets, that some pray in Fellowship Groups, in youth groups, in other groups, in church on Sundays. If God is our best friend, we should be talking to him at least every day – just because we can. Now, I would like especially to plug First Wednesday. I describe this as our main parish prayer meeting, and indeed it is. But we are usually getting about 15 people there, and I think it ought to be more; after all, it does only come round once a month. If you have not been to it in the last three years, please try to come sometime – you won't be the only one nervously sticking a toe in the water, and you will not be made to feel uncomfortable. Nobody that comes has to pray aloud, but I do hope that everyone present is hearing what is prayed for and saying Amen to add their own voice to those prayers. During this last year First Wednesday has usually prayed for our Sunday services, for individuals in need, for the work of our churches, and always for something beyond our own parish business too. So we have had presentations from Rob Dean on CVM, from David Keen on wider Yeovil church issues, from Edward Armitstead on General Synod, from Simon Corner on our youth ministry, from Keith Stevens on Street Pastors, from Ann Nixon on the Yeovil Pregnancy Crisis centre, and we've prayed for our bishops and diocese during the 1100th anniversary celebrations last year, and we have often prayed for Hilary and Marc in Benin, for Muyunda in Zambia, and for the Salbergs in Tanzania. But above all, we must pray for our own church. If we want to see progress and growth, if we want our church to

be not just busy for God, but useful to God, we shall need to pray. We shall all need to pray. That's my first thing.

2. Services. Second, some thoughts about services: Two main things under this heading, I suppose. The first has been the final demise of the choir. I was reading through my notes from last year's AGM and find that I said a year ago that the choir was small and would people again consider joining it. Well, in fact it continued to get smaller, but I would like to record my gratitude to those who soldiered on, serving the church in this way. But the final straw was the financial consideration, and it simply became unfeasible to pay Ray Willis £80 for a weekly choir rehearsal with so few, and so the choir has finally closed. But I am praying that our congregational singing will actually improve; we have been singing really well at St. Andrew's, whereas I think our singing at St. John's sometimes seems lacklustre and half-hearted. Perhaps we are too spread out, or the building is too high, or something. But, both for organ and for music group services, please sing up; put your heart into it. Maybe it will help to have the choir members in the midst of the congregation.

The second thing about services is this time we have spent at St. Andrew's. I have felt a bit like my Dad feels when all his children and grandchildren get together under one roof for a family celebration. It's been lovely to see the two church families interacting, getting to know one another better, serving each other, and it's been really marvellous for me to be in church with everyone on any one Sunday, rather than missing out on what's happening at the other place. Now, perhaps we got something wrong in the timing of the services, some certainly think that the less formal one with children's work should have been at 11:00 o'clock. But it has nonetheless felt very good to be able to offer a choice of styles – though they've actually only differed in the minor matters of music and robes; but I know these things matter a lot to some, and it's been great to be able to offer a choice. The congregations at each service have kept very equal numerically, and I have enjoyed warm fellowship and a seriousness of spiritual intention at both. What does it mean for the future? Well, that will be for your new PCC to work out ... for the moment we revert pretty much to where we were, but conversations will no doubt continue about whether St. John's should experiment with a similar double service format. What do you think? Please let me know.

I might give a particular mention to the music group and their technicians: For the first time they have been in action every Sunday, and I know it's been a real struggle to be ready by 9:15, especially when there's been an 8:00 a.m. service too. Thank you for your gifts and your hard work.

Last Summer we had a sermon series looking at about a dozen psalms, and in the Autumn a topical series on Christian growth, with subjects like loving Christ, reading the bible, resisting temptation, using your gifts. Since Christmas we have been in Luke chapters 3-5, and now looking at John's accounts of the resurrection in chapters 20-21. Again, I am always happy to take suggestions for subjects or biblical books to cover in sermons. I try to give us a balanced syllabus through the course of a year, not ignoring the major festivals but majoring on carefully worked-out series that allow the Bible itself to set the agenda.

3. Evangelism. My third area is Evangelism. We had two newcomers evenings last year, with ten or so people at each. It's been great to see the Street Pastors initiative up and running, and while its primary purpose is not actually overt evangelism, it clearly is very evangelistic in its outlook. I know that in its first year there have been people asking for prayer, people being prayed for on the streets, New Testaments being given out, people being invited to church, to alpha, and lots of conversations about God between Christians and non-Christians. From this church we have four Street Pastors and one prayer pastor, and the commitment they make is considerable. I went out on a Friday night with the SPs recently, and I'm afraid I only lasted till 1:00 a.m. and it was about the quietest night they've ever known. But it was good to have a little snapshot of the work first hand. Please continue to pray for opportunities to talk about Christ each time they go out.

Here at St. John's we have started the course called 'Christianity Explored.' I showed a clip of it last year at the AGM, and we have now run it twice. In the Autumn 40 people attended, and this Spring a further 17 or so. I'm really grateful to the Maitlands and the Uptons for making this work, and to all who have cooked marvellous meals for it too. There is no doubt it has begun to do its work for us ... some people with no real commitment to Christ have been deeply challenged and have engaged with the gospel in a very real way. Others – indeed some of you - have enjoyed a refresher on the basics and a new way of looking at our faith in Jesus. There are dates already pencilled in for this course to run again on Monday nights in the Autumn. Perhaps you have a friend you could pray for, invite, and bring – that is really the purpose of the course. Or perhaps you yourself would like to come; that would be great too. And let me be blunt: If you are not sure whether you are going to be in heaven with God when you die, you should definitely do this course.

4. Events. My fourth area is Events. We had a very happy Easter Day evening service last year with my Dad and his hymns: for me a deeply touching occasion that I shall never forget. We had another fantastic holiday club, some excellent social events, a happy celebration of St. Andrew's 75th anniversary, a big service with our diocesan bishop, Bishop Peter, in January this year, and lots of other great events. I particularly enjoyed the BYG evening in the hall at St. Andrew's, and we must continue to get better at our prayerful support and financial giving to our mission partners. I thought last Sunday was terrific on that subject, and I continue to wonder, as I know Ed Bangay does also, who God might be calling from among our current congregation to serve him overseas, or to ordination or other paid ministry in this country.

Two areas to go. The next one is people that I depend on.

5. People I depend on. Well, I continue to thank God so much for Ed, who is so caring and committed; for our wardens, Ros, Jennifer, Alan and Phil who have done far more than any of us know. I am sad that Ros and Jennifer are both stepping down; but I know it's been a hard year for them both in work and home life, with their wardens' duties on top, and they have both worked very hard for us here. I shall miss their wise counsel, their firm leadership, their unfussing getting on with vital things – thank you both very much indeed. PRESENTS: I am really grateful for our Readers, David and Keith, who continue to serve us in so many ways also. Bob and Kath continue as vital parts of our church machinery; they too do more than we ever know and work so graciously and with an evident love for all the church and for townsfolk and others who visit or phone. Kath organises me, and indeed all of us, so sweetly and

gently that we hardly even know it's happening. John Brookes continues to produce agendas and minutes and do all the other work of a Secretary; Martin Warr we have already thanked – but I do repeat it is a large workload and a heavy responsibility which Martin has carried for many years. Thank you – and also to all PCC members for your commitment and work. Two further stars in the firmament: one is Roger Fox. Roger, I fear this body of work at St. John's has been a really tough assignment for you, but we don't want it to go unrecognised, and we are – I certainly am – immensely grateful for all you do and all the hours of tedious paperwork, as well as the hours of practical stuff you do on site. We look forward to seeing the fruit of all your labours before long, and I am currently planning for Pentecost to be our first Sunday back, if the Lord permits. I'm afraid the tower is probably the next big project – and it will prove to be far more expensive than this interior work now coming to completion.

And that just leaves Simon Corner. Simon began work for us in the Autumn, and has already become a committed and trusted leader in the church, and the young people's work is benefiting hugely from his appointment. We have heard from him a little snapshot about his work, but believe me there is more to it than you have heard. Simon comes to staff meetings, and meets with me in addition about once a fortnight, so that I can keep reasonably up-to-date with the youth work, and so that we can pray together and support each other. Appointing a Youth Minister is the biggest and best thing that has happened during my three years here, and it feels really really good to have taken this step forward for the sake of our young people. Simon comes with a wealth of experience in this field, and lots of specialist knowledge that I don't have and you don't have, to bring young people into a real and lively encounter with the things of God. Now, Simon's only done half a year or so with us, and it's early days, but I feel sure we should begin to think and plan ahead so that the Youth Minister position does not simply fade out after three years, but so that it becomes a fixed part of our parish life, paid for and resourced for the long term. So far we have funding – almost entirely from our own giving – for three years. But I am really praying that we shall not stop then.

6. Future. And my last heading is to do with looking forward into the future. We host at St. John's a meeting each year for the Diocesan Evangelical Fellowship; last year we held a meeting on a Christian view of Climate Change. This year we host a preaching meeting with William Taylor, Rector of St. Helen's Bishopgate in London, a church that has done more for preaching nationally and internationally than any other I know, so it would be great to support that well, if you can. William Taylor will be here on July 6th.

In the Autumn, we look forward to a fantastic Weekend Away, September 10-12, and a group is planning the programme and you'll hear more shortly. It's such a great opportunity to deepen friendships, grow together, and hear from God. The speaker for the weekend is the Rev. Tony Baker, who is coming with his wife Margaret. Tony was the vicar who appointed me to my previous post in Brighton, and is now retired but very active in various ministries. He has been a vicar in various places, and also a theological educator, on the teaching staff of Trinity Bristol at one time. He and Margaret are both great to chat to one-to-one, a very encouraging couple, but I think we shall find them very challenging too with regard to our commitment to Christ. Do come if you can.

You've heard a bit about Back to Church Sunday, and that sounds like an exciting initiative for us to be involved with. That's later in September.

Another thing for the Autumn, and that is Fellowship Groups. Some of the leaders have been telling me that their groups have been together for a long time, and I know that some are over-full, while others have had their struggles. It seems like it's time for a shake-up. So I am currently planning to have a good shuffle of who is in which group, perhaps some new groups will form, perhaps some new people would be ready to join a group, perhaps some new group leaders may come forward. I continue to tell our leaders that their groups exist for three things: to study the bible, to pray together, and to deepen Christian friendships. So watch out for a re-vamp, a re-shuffle, a new start for the Fellowship Groups in the Autumn.

And one further thing to consider for the future. I feel that the parish is doing O.K. in general, keeping services ticking over, doing our best, and maintaining our position, as it were. But if we are to move from maintenance into mission, from ticking over to seeing some growth, I feel strongly that we shall need another minister in the parish, someone trained, ordained and paid. The churchwardens have talked about this, and so recently did the PCC. We may get a curate at some point, but there can be no guarantees that the Diocese will ever be able to help us with this. I know various churches in other places that have simply taken it upon themselves to advertise for someone, often called an 'Associate Vicar' or 'Associate Rector'. It would mean we would have to pay them ourselves, and there would be issues over housing and so on. It would be no small undertaking, but there might well be bodies that would help us. Do ask me more about it some time ... and tell me how you feel about the suggestion. Ed and I do our best to cover the things that only clergy can do; but it is pretty stretching on us both. I continue to feel that as a parish we are not making the most of our town centre position, not offering enough in spiritual nurture, not resourcing St. Andrew's sufficiently, not driving forward enough at St. John's.

Sorry to have waffled on for so long, and thank you for listening. Prayer, Services, Evangelism, Events, People, and the Future. I continue to thank God so much for your prayer and support here; it is great to be here, I find my job deeply challenging and stretching, but greatly rewarding, exciting and enjoyable. The vicar of the church I went to as a student in Cambridge died of cancer the day before Easter this year, aged 62, and was still vicar of that same church when he died. In his last few months he spoke a lot about knowing that death was coming, and on one occasion he was asked about heaven. He said, 'The bible doesn't say a lot about heaven. It says a lot about Jesus Christ. It says that he is the beginning and the end. The end of time is a person in biblical thinking, not an event. It is the person of Jesus Christ. The end of our lives is a person, the person of Jesus Christ. He stands beyond the grave to welcome believers into his arms when we die.' And I believe that. If it's true, it means that we must continue to preach Jesus, to love Jesus, to grow in Jesus, to trust Jesus, to walk with Jesus, to offer Jesus to others, and to serve Jesus always. He is the beginning and the end, the head of the church. He is our leader.

Rev James Dudley Smith
26th April 2010