

A New Year Letter – January 2022

Happy New Year to you and those you love. Now that the New Year is in full swing, I wanted to write to all of you about the year ahead and what I believe God has placed on my heart for us all as His Church in 2022.

During this past week I was doing my normal chaplaincy calls at the hospital. It's literally a few hours per week, but with the impact of COVID I know that it has been a lifeline for many church ministers and family who are restricted in seeing loved ones. Anyway as I came in, I put on my scrubs as normal but then I remembered that I had forgotten my track shoes. For infection control it is best that one wears completely different clothing in the hospital than outside. So I had no shoes to wear in the hospital, and then in the chaplaincy office I noticed that a spare pair of crocks were sitting. When I tried them on I realised very quickly that they were much smaller than my size (see the photo).



However I decided to wear them for my ward rounds even though they were very tight. It was not long before I could feel the real discomfort of wearing something that didn't fit me. By the end of my visits I was walking slowly with a bit of a limp. However as I met with sick people I could hear God ask me, "do you really understand what it's like walking in someone else's shoes? How can you become close to people and understand what I see in them? Do you really know what I am doing in these people?" These are very uncomfortable questions, because everyone of us at different times in our lives focuses on what is important to us, and maybe doesn't understand

or ignores the issues facing others.

The Church is no different. In a parish such as ours we have 648 people currently registered. Do I know how these 648 people are? Do I know their needs? The obvious answer is no, and neither could I ever understand the issues facing everyone – it is impossible. However God does. The very hairs on your head are known by him (Luke 12:7). You are fearfully and wonderfully made (Psalm 139:14). He knows when you get up and when you lie down (Psalm 139:2).

During this past year God has been working on me, driving me towards what really matters in life and in ministry. I think my reflection of COVID is that it has made all of us think about the same thing – that is that life and relationships are so precious; we have lost loved ones, we've not seen friends and family, it has been incredibly lonely for many, but as Nicky Gumbel writes, "there's got to be more to life than this". And so I think where God has directed me is to the simple fact that he deeply loves us. Now that might not seem like the most staggering of theological statements to come from the Rector, but God is interested in you. He wants those who have lost family to know they are covered with his feathers, and under his wings they will find refuge in him (Psalm 91:4). He is a present help in times of trouble (Psalm 46:1). He is deeply interested in you and has given everything, even his only Son Jesus for you.

I reflected to both the Staff team and the Select Vestry in this past week about the story of Jesus meeting the woman at the well (John 4). It was the hottest time of the day, not a time for going out, and yet this woman comes to draw water. Jesus in a very normal way asks the woman for a drink and so a longer conversation takes place about water. But as Jesus does in every situation, he digs deeper into the person's life. Jesus knows her intimately because he is God, he wants to bring healing, he wants her to know true love. And so the woman begins to open her heart to him, thirsting after something that is so much more life giving than water itself. Having had 5 husbands plus another relationship, it is clear she has not found the peace that she longs for. But by the end of this encounter, she knows that she has met the one who can give her all that she will ever need. Funny that she walks away without even worrying about the water jar that she has left behind – it's no longer important. And through that conversation she goes away changed, and calls others to meet with the Messiah.

There will be plenty more time for me to talk about my thoughts, but for now, I believe like the woman who met Jesus at the well, we have got to ensure that our focus as a Church in 2022 is on the individual within our church family, caring for their needs, seeing them as God sees them, really knowing them, being willing to invest the time that is necessary to encourage them, and equipping each other for service. Why? Because God cares deeply for each of you. And that means for me as your rector, that I must be willing to invest time getting closer to as many as possible, walking with them, listening to them, praying with them,

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encouraging them and equipping them. It means that I get alongside people like you, and instead of asking the question, can you help with an event in the church, I start with the question – how are you, what does Jesus mean to you, how can I encourage you in your walk, how can I equip you for service? The emphasis moves away from just moving from one event or activity to the next, busy busy busy, but instead building people up. It means not just using volunteers for what we need them to do but instead encouraging them in their knowledge and love of Christ, because service flows from Christian growth and not growth from service. When we spend time with the individual it requires much more investment – it will be costly. And whilst running from one event to the next is exciting, there is a danger that we never get to understand what it must be like to walk in the shoes of the many people who seek more out of life.

All of this is about gospel growth, and this always happens in the lives of individuals, not the structures or programmes we place around us. We start to see people not as cogs in a wheel, or resources in the programmes we run, but as individuals cherished by God advancing in their spiritual growth. And everyone, whether a lifelong member, or those who come for the first time, they begin to realise that they are valued, because we take time to sit with each other to find out how life really is.

I realise that there may be an appetite to simply continue where we left off before the pandemic, and race ahead with our programmes, but if we do that and ignore how people are feeling, ignoring tired leaders who need built up and trained, or people who have deeper needs, then we will be a church that only ever touches the surface. Remember how Jesus always went deeper with people – we must do the same if we truly love. It is important to stress that in this period of rebuilding the church after a pandemic, we will still be active in our ministries and outreach, however I will be encouraging us to think about the individual person, and whether we are willing to invest in them in the way that Jesus did.

As I begin to review all our ministries, this will inevitably impact on the structures of our church, my role, the role of lay people in discipling others, in fact everything and everyone. And during this year it is my hope to begin building, supporting and enabling people where every person knows they are loved yes by God, but also by us the church family . In February we will begin a teaching series on the book of Ephesians, which I believe is crucial coming out of COVID to remind us once again of the gospel story which shapes us, and then how that Gospel story should affect every part of our life story in our community and amongst those we love.

At the start of 2022 pray that God will direct us all as we seek to love and support people the way that He does. Pray as Paul did for the Ephesians, that God may give us the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that we may know him better, and that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, and his incomparably great power for us who believe. Finally pray as I gather with a few people to explore these issues further.

As always, feel free to meet with me for a coffee if you would like to explore these thoughts for 2022 further.

Rev Jonny

(if you are interested in some of the books that have shaped some of my thinking then consider reading Francis Chan – Multiply, Colin Marshall/Tony Payne – The Trellis and the Vine, Dane Ortlund – Gentle and Lowly)