

Sunday 20th February

Being Church together and a vision for Lent

We all have things that excite us...a night at the theatre, a meal out without having to cook it or wash it up.

Other things will turn us off immediately...cleaning the loo, or a trip to the dentist.

Now I fear that the Rector standing up and talking about Church AGMs or to give them their technical title, APCMs (Annual Parochial Church Meetings) would fit, for most people, into the second of these two categories.

But this morning I wanted to spend just a few minutes trying to do the impossible – enthralling you about your up-coming Annual Parochial Church Meeting. I also wanted to talk briefly to you about Lent.

This week, in my morning prayer times, I've been reading the Old Testament story of the Exodus. It's a gripping tale of how God hears his people groaning under the hardship of slavery in Egypt and how God then raises up Moses to lead his people out of Egypt.

God sends plague upon plague upon Pharaoh and the Egyptians until at last, amidst the wailing of Egypt at the death of their firstborn, the Israelites swarm out of the land of their captivity.

But having left, Moses has to lead the nation, and he finds himself busy all day every day hearing the disagreements between people and groups and passing judgement.

It's wearing him out.

And his wise old father-in-law Jethro says to him, "This is silly! Appoint people over groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, and let them deal with the issues."

It doesn't mean that Moses has given up being the leader; just that he shares the leadership and makes it possible for more to happen.

Now, in a way this mirrors the way the Church of England works.

The Church of England has always had as part of its mission to be the church for the whole of the nation. The Archbishop of Canterbury has always been its head.

But the country is divided up into Diocese, each with its own bishop to oversee it.

And each Diocese is divided up into archdeaconries, deaneries and parishes – ever smaller units, so that the Church of England has at least a reasonable chance of "being there" for everyone who lives in the country.

But of course, it is not possible for one rector, or vicar, to do all the Christian ministry in even a small parish.

Indeed, it's not desirable that he should try.

Each of the people of God in any parish have gifts and talents that they can use for the worship of God, the care of others, the mission of the church; many of them will be better at all sorts of jobs than the minister.

Some of the jobs that people are called to do is to be a church warden or to serve on the PCC.

PCC members form a sort of eldership, who, with the Rector, oversee the life of the church. Wardens are senior amongst them, and additionally have the responsibility of the care of church buildings.

Importantly, each of our three church PCCs also elect five of their members to sit on the united Benefice Council; which with me oversees the collective life of our Benefice.

And you all, as church members have the chance to nominate others. You all have the chance to vote. You even have the opportunity to stand for election yourself...all at your church's AGM.

Now, how might you decide who to nominate? How might you decide who to vote for? How might you decide, indeed whether to stand yourself?

Well, you might take on board the sort of people who Jethro suggested to Moses he might appoint to help him lead the people of Israel: people who are:

1. "able" – people who will bring skills of leadership, wisdom and discernment, faith or courage; perhaps people with the gifts of administration, or dealing with finance; people who have pastoral skills or teaching skills; people with practical skills.
2. who fear God – people with a real and genuine faith in God; people who have a love for God and a desire to put that faith and love into action.
3. who are trustworthy and hate dishonest gain – people of good character, who seek to live up to God's standards.

Now I'm aware that by sharing this list, I run the risk of no one standing and ending up with no one serving as wardens and PCC members!

We need to be realistic. All of us fall short of these standards in some way – even clergy...or especially clergy!

And as always, we need to be understanding and supportive of each other; not condemning each other, but spurring each other on.

But it is also good for us to be reminded of what a high calling leadership in God's church is, and for those of us who are called in this way to be spurred on to live up to that calling.

Attending your church AGM then, is chance to show your support for the people who are willing to put themselves forward; to step up to the plate, and to serve in this way.

Come along to show them that they are appreciated, are supported and loved.

But I hope that our church AGMs might do more than simply promote democracy in church and show support for those elected to serve.

I hope that they might be a chance to look back on the last year with thankfulness to God for all the good things he has done; and be a chance to look forward to the future with hope, especially as we announce the results of our stewardship campaign.

I trust that our Benefice Council AGM (on Pancake day) will prove especially encouraging, as we look back on the year just gone and as I give my “State of the Union” address. And I hope to give some indicators of how I hope we might move forward together – all in the context of an all age pancake party.

Please come and if you have kids bring them along too. We’ll eat pancakes together, and then while the adults do the meeting stuff, there will be games for the kids.

So, let me now move on to say a few words about Lent.

Lent, of course begins the day after our Pancake party benefice AGM – on 9th March, Ash Wednesday.

Soon after I arrived, we held a series of open meetings, and asked each of the three PCCs to consider our priorities for the year ahead.

As a result, the Benefice Council decided to focus on three areas – creative worship, growing as disciples and outreach to the community.

To give people chance to grow in their faith; in their discipleship of Jesus, we are going to hold a series of special services through Lent, and offer seven mid-week “small groups” for people to go to.

Each of these small groups will focus in some way on the topic of prayer; but with different themes and different approaches.

For those who like reading, there are book groups. For those who like bible study, there is bible study; for those who like something more practical there is making prayer stations.

You can look at the nuts and bolts of praying; praying when you feel spiritually dead; the prayers of the bible or of the 1662 Book of Common Prayer.

In order to make it possible for everyone to attend, we’ve banned any business meetings in Lent.

Please let me encourage you to join one of these groups.

You can find details of all the different groups in the leaflet you were given when you came into church- your guide to Lent 2011.

We've done a lot of theology over the last month. We've done some pretty serious soul searching about how we use our time, talents and resources for God's glory.

My prayer is that our AGMs will give us chance to take stock and move forward positively.

And that we can then take a little time out for just the few weeks of Lent to enjoy growing in the most wonderful activity of speaking with and listening to, our God.