

Advent 1 2017

Fr Peter Groves

It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his servants in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch. Mark 13.37

So here we are. Home sweet home. Whilst we have managed to maintain a regular and daily pattern of services over the past few months, it is only today, on the first Sunday of the Church's new year, that we can begin to describe ourselves as being back to normal. Of course, we are not yet back to normal. Plenty remains to be done. We are running cables to the pulpit and the organ because the new sockets are not yet ready for use, and will be completed on Tuesday. Also this week, the new CCTV cameras will be installed. The sanctuary lamps remain absent, but will return before Christmas. We will be using the temporary organ we have hired until a few weeks into the New Year. Some of the glasswork requires further cleaning. Some patches of the interior require further painting. And the full glories of the new lights have yet to be revealed; once the complexities of sixteen different lighting settings have been finalised, the building will look even better than it does today.

Of course, there's also a sense in which we don't want to be back to normal. The project we have undertaken is one of repair and restoration, but also one of development and improvement. And it was long overdue. For quite a long time St Mary Magdalen's has had to endure a state of repairs which did not begin to do justice to the quality of our worship or the vibrancy of our church community. We have been like the man going on a journey, not simply because we have had to worship elsewhere in the past four months, but because we are always on a journey of stewardship and responsibility, and our care for this quirky but remarkable building, with its near thousand year history, is one of the most important aspects of that stewardship and responsibility.

But as we know, a church is not a building. If it were, our journey would be over or at least very nearly over. As it is, the journey of discipleship in which we are all engaged has simply moved from one stage to the next. This beautiful church is an exciting place to be, but it is an exciting place to be not principally because of its history or appearance, but principally because of what happens here, and the people who

make it happen here, and the people who move on from making it happen here to making it happen elsewhere. In the past dozen years or so, something like thirty members of this church have entered ordained ministry within the Church of England. Dozens and dozens more have moved on from this place to enrich other places, places which have taken them all over the world. The ministry of this church, of which you are a part, reaches throughout the Anglican communion and beyond.

The journey of St Mary Magdalen's through its history has a move from the local to the ever more widely spread. We no longer serve a predominantly residential community within our parish boundaries, as was true a hundred years ago. We no longer serve as stable congregation of people who live within reach and commit years and years even decades and decades to the life of this church. Some of you have, and some of you will, but on the whole we are a transient member of the body of Christ, constantly sending people out beyond our city to new things, new places, and new people. Whilst we are always attracting new people and growing as a body, we lose people who move on almost as quickly as we gain newcomers.

Advent invites us to mark the beginning of a new church year with vigilance. We are commanded to watch, to stay awake, to pay attention. We are called to be aware of the God who is coming among us, called to respond to his initiative, called to stand ready for the judgement which his love brings upon us. As we celebrate the completion of our major works, we can proudly stand at our post and smile at our achievement. But even as we do so, God is calling our attention to the journey which continues. The restoration work we have undertaken was made possible through the blessing of a very significant legacy. The funds for its payment already exist and so we can relax. Except that we cannot relax, because we are an expanding and ambitious church community and are determined to answer God's call to journey with him. And so we turn to the future with confidence and joy, but also with the vigilance that Advent requires. And our vigilance should make us all too aware that we simply do not, as a church community, provide ourselves with sufficient financial support. This is something we must address.

I have long described St Mary Magdalen's as a poor Oxford church behaving like a rich London church. That is perhaps an exaggeration, we are not poor. But we are not rich either. We don't own commercial property, we don't have a church hall to rent, we don't have historic endowments. We do expect the highest standards of liturgy and ministry and music and outreach. We are right to do so, but we must accept the responsibility they bring.

That is why regular members of the congregation will have received, or can expect to receive, a letter signed by me, but addressed from the whole of the church council. That is why you have in front of you a leaflet on the subject of Christian giving. Please read it. It is not empty piety. The God of Jesus Christ is the God who gives. The beauty and the mystery we enjoy in this place, the excitement and the joy of engaging new Christians, of nurturing vocations, of challenging the emptiness of secularism with a confident and robust theological message, all these are the blessings we receive from God, not achievements we have earned or to which we are entitled. God so loved the world that he gave... If we want to be like God, like the one who loves, like the one who gives, then we know what we must do.

The man who is going on a journey put his servants in charge. He leaves his doorkeeper on watch. He requires them all to be vigilant. As we enter into Advent, we are challenged again to prepare ourselves for that unsettling truth, that the source of all things makes his home among us in the form of an utterly vulnerable human being. What is our response to God's ridiculous generosity? Is it thank you very much, I'll see you next Sunday? Or do we dare to wait and to watch, do we dare to respond in faith, do we dare to be like God? In a few weeks' time we will do an awful lot of giving. Perhaps, just perhaps, God has something to do with that.