

Address to St Mary's AGM on Sunday 29th April 2007

It is a rare privilege for a Churchwarden to get to give the address at an Annual General Meeting and one that I will try not to abuse. I have had to make two speeches of late, one in January which lasted three and a half days and one a few weeks ago which lasted a modest half a day. I promise not to get close in terms of time even to the second of those two speeches!

If the purpose of this address was not laid down as reviewing the year that has passed, it would be tempting to look forward to the end of the Interregnum, to the Induction next Saturday and to tell you why Rosemary and I – and others who have had the opportunity of meeting Mary Bide over the last few weeks – know that we have a really super person coming to be our Rector and one who is ready and able to continue to move us forward in our Christian faith. But that must wait for you each to discover over the coming months.

Over the last year I have had the opportunity to reflect on what St Mary's is all about, not least of all as we prepared the Parish Profile to describe St Mary's to those thinking of applying to become the next Rector, but also during the process of drafting the Personal Profile to describe what we were looking for in a Rector. These were documents which your Church Committee spent many careful hours drafting and approving together with the PCC. I should say how profoundly grateful Rosemary, Jonathan Turton (the other Parish Warden) and I are for all that they contributed towards those documents.

The result of my reflections, coupled with some research into medical journals, is officially to declare that the congregation of St Mary's is suffering from Acute Schizophrenia. I suppose I should explain what I mean by that and why we should be proud of that diagnosis.

This is no sudden illness that has befallen us but one that to my certain knowledge has been creeping up on us for over twenty years. As that is

but the blinking of an eye in terms of the history of St Mary's, there may be others who can trace the seeds of schizophrenia back much further.

Where else would you find the traditions of mainstream Church of England worship so lovingly upheld, whilst there continues to be a desire and thirst for modernisation in some forms of liturgy and music? With the very recent introduction of a new monthly service at 6pm on a Sunday called "Celebrate" our youth worker Catherine Parkes together with Bruce Rickards have enthusiastically extended the range of worship which is offered here and it is hoped this will attract teenagers and twenty year olds back to the Church. We should all be grateful for their efforts and wait to see how that service may evolve.

The Schizophrenia runs deeper than that. Look no further than the strong support provided to the mature through home communion taken to them in particular by Gwen Cook, Margaret Swain and Jenny Michalacopoulos, the services which they conduct at retirement homes throughout the Parish and the hugely popular Tuesday Lunches provided by many members of the congregation; all this happens whilst at the same time, we have taken the bold step to employ our first full time youth worker, whilst Caroline Revill organises a weekly crèche, and we have a Sunday School which continues to flourish under the leadership of our three Children's Wardens, Andrew Lenon, Michelle Sweet and Helen Sergeant. It is worth noting the utter astonishment from the Diocese at the number of Child Protection forms submitted from this Church to cover those who assist with teaching and nurturing our young, astonishment coupled with, I suspect, some regret that the Diocese had agreed to pay for the vetting process. We should thank them all for adding to the schizophrenia of this place.

It does not end there. Chris Thomas joined us in January and the music, so well established under Norman Harper, continues to flourish in every direction. If you were to stay from 9.30 through to 11.15 on a Sunday morning you could hear a sixteenth century Motet, a Taizé Chant and modern hymns accompanied by a youth choir whose voices are

projected electronically. We owe him and the choir much thanks for all they do to enhance our various forms of worship.

But it does not end there. Whilst we are keen to preserve the magnificent building which is St Mary's, even during an Interregnum the work of enhancing it does not cease. The congregation's response was 100% in support of the plan to move the console from the west end to the North Gallery. We have Elizabeth Hamilton to thank for her tireless work to draft a Faculty Application which will give the best chance of success.

Why is St Mary's able to be so many different things for so many different people? Why are children, teenagers, young families, the middle aged, the retired, and the elderly all equally at home under St Mary's roof? I suggest it is because at its centre is the bedrock of devoted service by the laity and, more importantly the clergy and others who Sunday after Sunday provide outstanding worship and who day in and day out minister to us and provide the highest quality of pastoral care. By way of example, although there were, it may be thought for a Church with an Electoral Roll of our size, relatively few who came to the Holy Week morning or evening services, those who did were treated to a series of absolutely first rate addresses given by Clare Peppiatt. We are a lucky lot to be able to call upon the talents of such as she. Although we have had an opportunity already to express our gratitude to Canon Christopher Davies for all that he did for us and for being the exemplary Rector that he was, it is right that at this AGM we should once again acknowledge the debt we owe him.

Throughout the Interregnum that same devoted service which he showed has continued thanks to the sheer hard work and commitment of Hilary, Bruce and Joan as well as the support we have received from the Team clergy and from Revd Tim Marwood who has regularly led our worship. On your behalf I thank them all. Between them they have ensured that the new Rector can walk into a Church which remains well and truly alive in Christ.

There remain so many to thank and, to avoid taking this meeting into the small wee hours, little time to do so. Some, in particular our verger Tony Winship, have already received our thanks during the course of this meeting and I will not repeat our thanks again. I have spoken of a year of change; one change which affected us all was that of Parish Administrator. The only recompense for our loss of Julian Kent to Australia where as Father Julian he is fulfilling his call to the ministry, is that we were very fortunate to have Fiona Grom to take his place. Sadly for her, there has been no honeymoon period. It has been all go from the start. We owe her our thanks for relieving us of much of the burden of administration.

In addition there are the countless numbers in the congregation who assist year in and year out whether on the Church Committee, assisting the verger as, in particular, Vic Sylvester does, those who help to keep our Church clean, those who act as Acolytes, as Communion Assistants, who provide the glorious flowers, who read, who prepare the Intercessions, with particular thanks to Gwen Cook who, having given us years of exceptional prayers, has decided that she should now step down, who count the collections, who polish the silver, who iron the linen, who record the services, who maintain the notice boards, who contribute to or edit Grapevine, who keep the Churchyard tidy and who do the many other things which are accomplished for the Church. To all of them our thanks are due. Lastly in this list, my thanks on behalf of you all to Rosemary who, knowing full well that she would be overseeing an Interregnum, nevertheless agreed to become Churchwarden last year. Her constant devotion to her duty as Churchwarden has been quite fantastic. She and Roger may regret for the first time living so close to St Mary's, but what a bonus it is to have her as our Churchwarden.

But it is time to return to my theme: acute schizophrenia. Every lawyer owes a duty to the court which overrides his duty to his client. By way of example it places on him a duty to draw any authority contrary to his

submissions to the attention of the court. He is not allowed to cover it up. It is in that spirit that I feel I ought to draw attention to one constant trait of the congregation of St Mary's which undermines the diagnosis of schizophrenia. It is something to which Julian adverted when he spoke to us in Church on his last Sunday. It is to the constant way in which we care for others that I refer. Some Churches do so to the sound of trumpets, but at St Mary's it is always quietly and sincerely done. Whether to relieve the grief of a widow or widower or the grief of young parents, whether it is to visit the sick, or to telephone a worried companion of the sick, whether it is to help out someone by devoting time to their needs or to assist them financially, or whether it is just to let that person know that there is someone there for them, this pastoral care, shared by the congregation, is quietly and lovingly achieved.

And so I say "long last the acute schizophrenia and long last the constancy of St Mary's".