

Not long after I arrived here we had a discussion morning in Fellowship House. We talked about this church, the things we do well, the things we do badly, what we would like to achieve in the following five years. The results of that morning shaped the thinking of the committee, and many of the ideas have been put into practice. Not all. Some things we tried and they failed. Some things never got off the ground.

Well, that was well over 5 years ago. I have found it interesting to see what the outcome of that morning was. For example, we decided at committee that a priority was welcome. So to help people get to know one another we would start occasional breakfasts after the 8:00 o'clock service, we would have more social events, and we would do more with Toddlers. We decided that the building was not very welcoming and the porch could be improved. Well, all of that has happened. But we also thought we would start a men's breakfast group – interestingly, that failed.

The time has come to take stock, to analyse what failed and why, what succeeded and why, and what needs to happen in the next five years. So there is going to be another discussion morning, on October 5th, in Fellowship House, and I hope many of you will come.

This church is named after St Mary the Virgin and today it is our Patronal festival. What better day to start our thinking about what this dedication means to us?

In the bible Mary features many times, and not always in the same way. Like each and every one of us, she was a complex person, with likes and dislikes, good days and bad days. Most difficult of all the reference to her is the story told in all three synoptic gospels of Mary and the rest of her family waiting outside the house where Jesus was staying. They wanted to see him. Why did they want to see him? They wanted to protect him. They felt he was making a spectacle of himself, people began to think he was not quite in his right mind. A messenger was sent in and told Jesus 'your mother and brothers are outside and want to see you.' And what does he do? Does he rush out and give his mother a hug? No, he says, 'who are my mother and my brothers, and looking around him he says 'these are my mother and my brothers.'

As a church, it is all too easy to be like Mary in this story. We love Jesus, but not in the way he wants. Mary wants to keep him safe, protect him. But Jesus is the ultimate risk taker. He preaches freedom. If we follow this example of Mary, we are outside, irrelevant, society will disregard us. Family is important, of course it is, but a church cannot look only to its own family. It is the strength of the Church of England and the Parochial system that the church is there for the community in which it stands, for the people who come to church, and the people who don't. So all must be welcome here.

Let us fast forward to another story. Mary at the cross, watching her son die in agony. There are many mothers, the world over, who have had to watch their children die, who have felt completely helpless in the face of such suffering. Yet Mary was there. She did not hide her face, or refuse to look, however much that hurt, however much those images would remain etched in her mind until her own death. Perhaps she thought back to that time when she and her family had tried to save Jesus from himself, knowing that it could all only end in tears. What would it mean to be like Mary in

this story? It would mean we too cannot not shirk from the suffering around us, even when we think that those suffering have brought their troubles on themselves. Sometimes we will be able to help, and on other occasions, as in the case of the terrible suffering of people in Syria, we can only watch and cry. But our silent witness, our tears, will count for something. They will at the very least honour the dead. They will demonstrate our love and love once released can have remarkable and unforeseen consequences.

Two painful images of Mary that can shape our ministry here. But there is another. Today's reading of the young Mary, sent away to her cousin's house so as not to shame the family, responding to Elizabeth's words with this amazing song of praise.

This is a young woman, brought up in a society where only the rich had power, only men had any say in what happened, women were expected to submit to their husbands, where slavery was an accepted fact of society, and suddenly she has this revolutionary insight. This is not how God wants it. We find similar sentiments in the prophet Isaiah and in Amos and elsewhere, but in this young girl, the subversive nature of this song of praise comes through most strongly.

What would it mean for this church to take these words seriously?

Who are we consciously or unconsciously excluding or belittling? These are questions that we need to ponder for we have to decide what kind of church do we want to be?

The temptation, and it is a very big temptation, is to aim to be successful, however one measures that. Getting more people to come to church is not a bad thing – indeed it is probably a very good thing. But it cannot be our sole aim.

If I am very tired in the evening and there is nothing on television, I sometimes watch QI. It tends to be a mistake, because sooner or later, Stephen Fry makes some caustic and ridiculous comment about God based on an image of the church that is intolerant, judgemental, and irrelevant to society and I get cross. The tragedy is that so often the church is precisely that.

But I hope not this one. For our God is a God of love, who embraces all, the good, the bad and the ugly. He takes risks, above all he risks being hurt and rejected, and all in the name of love. He puts justice and mercy and care for all his creatures as high ideals, and is saddened by hypocrisy, arrogance and greed.

We are the church of St Mary the Virgin. We have an awful lot to live up to. Together we can work out how we do just that.

Amen.