

**ALL SAINTS CHURCH**

**2 JANUARY 2022**

**FOUR STEPS FOR 2022**

**Talk given by Tom Peryer at the first service of 2022**

As you all know, this church stands on one of the most well-known walking routes in England – the Cotswold Way. It's 102 miles in length and runs from Bath Abbey to Chipping Camden. Some of you will have walked the whole of it or parts of it and some have even run parts of it in relay teams. For some years now All Saints has had a strap line of a "Church on the Way" which is a play on words. Meaning that we are on the Cotswold Way but that we are also a church that is still on the way to somewhere, we have not yet reached our destination. We're by no means a finished article, a perfect church. And if you're looking for a perfect church, we're not the one for you and if you do find one, please don't join it, because you will only spoil it.

Now some of you may have been on family walks in this drizzly post-Christmas week. Hands up if you have? Family walks they're wonderful things aren't they. Always happy occasions, always walking in the sun, the children loving every minute of it, no one saying I'm tired, are we nearly finished. I don't think so. Many a walk is a mixture of hard fun and frustration, of games and graft, of the smooth with the rough, the level with the steep climb.

And of course we are all familiar with that sense of walking as a picture of our journey through life and in particular our Christian journey through life with all its highs and lows. That picture was given its most vivid expression in that book, now rarely read 'Pilgrim's Progress'. By the way there is an excellent animation of this book and it may be shown as serial for some of the children on a Sunday morning. Here is a map of the journey that Pilgrim went on.

Our reading from Proverbs this morning was all about our walk through life:

Here are those words in a modern paraphrase and they have been influenced by Pilgrim's Progress.

*I'm writing out clear directions to Wisdom Way,  
I'm drawing a map to Righteous Road.  
I don't want you ending up in blind alleys,  
or wasting time making wrong turns.  
Don't take Wicked Bypass;  
don't so much as set foot on that road.  
Keep your eyes straight ahead;  
ignore all sideshow distractions.*

As we look into 2022, you will have some sense of what lies ahead. A new birth to look forward to, a wedding, building works to start on home - or church, a holiday planned, a change of job, exams to take, Rectors to appoint, an operation to face. Some of it may seem daunting, some of it you might wish was not going to happen, some of it is to be looked forward to with excited anticipation.

But none of us knows what exactly what 2022 will hold for us in its entirety whether as an individual, as a family, as a church and as a nation. We do not know the joys or the sorrows, the achievements or the disappointments, the triumphs or the struggles. But as Corrie Ten Boom used to say: *'Never be afraid to trust an unknown future to a known God'*

So to start this new year here are four steps to consider. Primarily they are addressed to us as the people of All Saints Weston in 2022 although you may also want to apply them to your own lives.

My first step is what looks like a sad one.

#### **STEP DOWN**

So just before Christmas we all heard that Mark our Rector for just over 4 years was stepping down from that position, as of two days ago on 31 December. The announcement will have come as a shock to some; others of you will perhaps have expected it, given Mark's 4-month absence and the regrettable lack of news and information.

I guess the announcement has provoked a number of feelings, including: puzzlement, sadness, disappointment, frustration – maybe even crossness, with Mark and the powers-that-be, whoever they are. I expect also there has been a fair amount of speculation about what lies behind the announcement.

As the message from the churchwardens said, do feel free to speak to them about the matter and that goes for other members of the Standing Committee of the PCC, Pippa Page, Rob Gray the Treasurer and myself. Let me stress that none of

those people knows a great deal. This has been a personal decision by Mark and Meg based on a lot of things. I can say that nothing terrible has been done on anyone's part. Mark is not moving onto another parish or another post within the Church of England.

You also know that they will not be moving out of the Rectory until 31 March. I believe that they will then be moving to just outside Bath on the other side.

This is not something that anyone would have wished and I don't suppose it has been an easy decision for Mark and Meg. Being a leader is not an easy path to tread. That is the case even in a church full of people seeking to follow Jesus. Sometimes this adds to the pressures, especially when it comes to discerning the right path for a church to take. And Covid has been an exceptionally challenging and unsettling time for so many leaders, including pastors and priests alike. Mark rose to the tech challenge of Covid really well and has led the team in that respect but the continuing uncertainty about what to do for the best has been a wearying pressure—amongst others.

But Mark's stepping down is not the end of the world for him, As he said in his announcement

*Meg and I know that it is time to go and dig another well so that we can flourish in the wider church.*

And it is not the end of the world for us as a church. The sky has not fallen in. One of the strengths of this church is there are lots of gifted and mature people in it, who are prepared to

put those gifts to good service for the Lord and for the church. And no church should ever be dependent on one leader.

Some of you may be wondering whether or not to contact Mark and Meg. I'm sure they would appreciate goodwill messages from you and your prayers. And I think we need to find a way of saying thank you to them for the service they have given.

So that is STEP DOWN

Now for the second one...

### **STEP BACK**

With the stepping down of Mark and the need to appoint a new Rector, we do need to spend some time *Stepping Back* to reflect on the situation we are in and the challenges that lie ahead of us on the pathway we are walking.

One of the pleasures of a hill or a mountain walk is that from time to time, you stop to catch your breath again and then look back on where you have come from and you can see the landscape laid out before you. If you have not yet reached the summit, you can then look up and see what lies ahead, and that can be daunting, but less so if you can spot the track ahead of you.

So it would be a good thing for us to pause, step back and reflect on the recent past and look ahead. In the book of Acts, when the church was faced with a big challenge, this time over

an important piece of doctrine and church practice, Luke records:

*'The apostles and elders met to consider this question. And after much discussion ...Notice that 'consider this question and after much discussion' Peter got up and addressed them. Discussion can be difficult and wearying but it's a necessary part of discernment.*

The equivalent of the apostles and elders by which I mean the churchwardens and PCC will be meeting a week on Monday with the Archdeacon – he's a sort of ecclesiastical regional manager for the B&NES area working under the direction of the Managing Director, the Bishop of the Diocese.

That meeting will be the formal start of the process for the recruitment of a new Rector. As part of that process, we (along with Langridge and North Stoke) will have to write a profile of ourselves saying what sort of a church we are, what our vision for the future is and what sort of person we think we need to lead us in the next few years of our 800 year history. So we will very much be reflecting on those things – and of course there will be differing views between the three churches and within the PCC – and perhaps even wider views amongst our diverse membership of 250-300 adults.

As part of our stepping back and reflecting, we will be following a series of Sunday morning talks under the banner heading *'What sort of a church ought we to be?'* based on Peter's question in his second letter. 'what kind of people ought you to be?' Dave Parr will start the series next week. Under the heading of 'A holy and Godly Church'

So good questions to ask are:

- What sort of church are we now and what sort of church ought we to be?
- Are there things that we need to repent of – to admit that we have got wrong
- What sort of a minister do we want to lead us? Are we ready for a woman rector?

As we go through this process, recognising that each one of us has a different perspective, it would be good to share ideas, hopes, fears, concerns etc but only in the right spirit.

If you have something to say, then please say it, but say it well. This is not a time for grinding of axes or the riding of hobby horses. Paul tells his friend Titus to remind his congregation *'not to slander any one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.'*

Would that every email and every twitter feed followed those guidelines!

*not to slander any one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone.'*

We may need to find some formal ways of stepping back and reviewing where we are. A couple of good places to do some stepping back would be the day of prayer on 11 January and Saturday 22 January when there will be a day devoted to Discovering God's heart for our church and our community.

So now to my third step

### **STEP FORWARD**

Whilst it is good to step back and also to look back, this should only be with the aim of stepping forward in due course. Do you remember that TV programme, the inimitable, incomparable, illustrious "Good Old Days" with Leonard Sachs as the impresario. Well there were plenty of good old days as well as bad old days but as a people of hope, we are a people of the present and the future. We are not locked down in this world, we are just a passing through and we look forward, as we step forward into new territory and places that God has for us.

St Paul also saw it as a race Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead,

Hebrews 12: 1 also saw it as a race in a great Greek or Roman stadium. Here is that verse also in a very free paraphrase by the Message.

*Do you see what this means—all these pioneers who blazed the way, all these veterans cheering us on? It means we'd better get on with it. Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes*

*on Jesus, who both began and finished this race we're in. Study how he did it. Because he never lost sight of where he was headed ... When you find yourselves flagging in your faith, go over that story again ... That will shoot adrenaline into your souls!*

So we are to be a people stepping forward, stepping out. That means pressing ahead with our plan to reshape this space and the facilities in it ....pressing ahead with the appointment of a new Rector and others to help us in our ministry and mission ... stepping forward to rise to the challenge of discovering God's heart, especially for what we might do in the community ....stepping forward to become a more authentically Christian people, attuned to the word of God and the spirit of God, building up our own fellowship but looking to gather people to walk with us in the footsteps of Jesus. The new Alpha course starting in two weeks' time is one way of doing that.

We are not to step back, to retreat or even to stand still but to keep moving in the spirit. When God appeared to Gideon, back in the book of Judges when everything was a mess, he said *'Gideon go in the strength you have and I am sending you and I am with you.'* That is what we are to do 'to go in the strength we have knowing that God is with us and is God is sending us'.

But to do that we come to my fourth STEP – we all need to Step??? .....UP!

### **STEP UP**

We won't be able to move forward unless lots of us here Step Up. A church of our size requires scores of people to provide

the range of services and ministry that we do and whilst it would be right as part of our stepping back to ask 'do we need to do all these things right now?' there is no way we can simply put everything on ice.

One of my favourite books of the Old Testament is Nehemiah who led the rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem. He was very clearly the leader but he had a group of people around him who supported him in lots of ways and almost everyone who was a resident at the time got involved in doing the repair job and make the city secure and safe.

I said nearly everybody but not quite everybody. Chapter 3 is a great long list of which families built which part of the wall but verse 5 says *'The next section was repaired by the men of Tekoa but their nobles would not put their shoulders to the work under their supervisors.'*

In the next chapter they have rebuilt have the wall because as verse 6 says *'for the people worked with their heart'* or as others translations have it *'the people had a mind or a heart to work'*.

For a church to thrive inside and outside we need people who will put their shoulders to the work and who do have a mind and a heart to work. Paul in Galatians says

*Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*

So can we all find a way, however modest, to step up. Just as we don't give God the dregs of our time and our money, let's not give the leftover bits of the day and the schedule.

So to conclude: In the face of Mark's stepping down, let us step back to reflect and then step forward and up as we move in 2022 confident in God's provision and in our calling as disciples.

Finally those words quoted by King George VI at the start of World War II written by a missionary poet who grew up just down the road in Hanham. I'm just going to change one or two words.

*I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year:*

*"Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown."*

*And he replied:*

*"Step out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God.*

*That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."*