

Each part working properly

Incredibly, this is my fourth round of visitations, having hit the ground running in May 2006 – doesn't time fly when you're having fun!

I confessed in that first charge to feelings of inadequacy in matching the enormous potential and expectations of this office – you may recall the part-time, costumed zoo job or the lavatory – more vulnerable than venerable!

In the second year I teased our great institution a little for sometimes allowing comparison, not unconvincingly, to cardboard equivalents.

Then the Bishop came round with me –instead of me when I succumbed to viral infection (not of the swine type; may we all be spared that this spring!).

That was part of +Nigel's introduction to us and our chance to experience a new style of leadership.

Both +Nigel and I have come quickly to recognise that there is so much good in this Diocese,

so much solid work, so many reliable people, so much scope for optimism, so many opportunities.

Under God we believe that it is our job to support the work, value the people and unlock the potential.

But, what's it all for?

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The Strict and Particular Baptist minister allowed himself, under much protest, to go along to the Newmarket Races. He watched with suspicion - evangelically fervent, biblically attuned, morally sharp, a judgemental eye -everything his Roman Catholic host did.

Before every race the good father surveyed the fine equine beasts, made a series of hand gestures, placed his bet and

watched and waited. Every horse duly signed went on to win. Consistently. Race after race.

Our Protestant cynic began to believe that there may be something in this after all. Not so much 'gambling' as divine reassurance.

On the final race of the day he spotted again what he considered to be the flamboyant ritual, and then proceeded to the counter to place his own, what he justified now to be, investment.

They were off; down the first furlong, round the corner, doing well – then, on the final stretch his chosen horse, Blessed Assurance, fell down dead under its rider.

He couldn't wait to remonstrate with his clerical colleague.

Explain that will you. Every race, you bless a horse; place your bet and the horse wins. On the last race you do the same and the horse collapses and dies.

"Sure to tell you're not a Catholic" said the priest "you don't know the difference between a blessing and last rites."

Reading what is going on and recognising how to respond is crucial to our future success.

- The Archdeacon has an eye to implementation –
 - Faculty to allow wide consultation and keep the church from compromising the uniqueness of sacred space by short-term thinking or ecclesiastical fashion.
 - Inspections to keep us watchful of those little neglects which turn in to devastating problems.
 - Peace-making, for it, too, is part of getting it right – even the tiniest niggle needs to be sorted (and there have been plenty of those!).

- The Archdeacon tries to be the human face of the Diocese exercising control, advising on systems, getting the basics in place so that the real work can go on.
- But, more than all this, the Archdeacon must keep the Church to the bigger picture –
 - Being the Church of England, the Church in England by law established.
 - We are there for everyone –
 - those who don't want a church, and those who serve her faithfully,
 - the child needing to grow up in a country of values and ceremonies which bring depth and significance to life,
 - in support of sound relationships which God waits to bless,
 - to offer care for the weak, the sick, the vulnerable,
 - to give hope in that life which is yet to be.

In public worship and village fete, in church fund raising and shared common concern, in village hall and pub, to individual and community, for village plan and so that no one is overlooked –

the Church is a powerful, present symbol of everything which lends support, articulates value and enables partnership.

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How do we help people to dig deep into themselves in these crisis times – swine flu, the green agenda and financial melt-down?

Every week there is a different fear, a new panic. A handful of cases of flu and we are in the grip of a pandemic; signs of climate change and the planet is destroyed beyond repair; the collapse of a bank and our whole system of finance has gone for ever.

Parody, yes;

complacency, no;

reality check, desperately needed!

The trouble is keeping things in proportion and responding together, rationally, proportionately.

We have become sophisticated as modern societies, instantly, inter-netedly informed about everything - yet we seem to have forgotten basic truths – cleanliness, respect for the world around us, prudence.

Amazingly technological hospitals which apparently forgot about hand-washing.

All hospitals are now “clean hand environments” – weren't they always?

A mad rush to reduce carbon emissions, but for years wasn't it obvious that just using, consuming, wasting and squandering, with little thought of balance, stewardship or limitation on lifestyle or travel, was depleting a finite planet?

Enough and sufficiency and treading lightly have been a basic part of the human creed for generations. How did we forget?

Frenzy about the market system, forgetting that no matter how complex economics is as a science, greed is as old and as pernicious and as insidious as ever it was.

Not even Robert Peston could make it simpler – greed is a stem-cell which, unchecked, will grow many evils and ultimately destroy the body.

It is as if our wiring system has so broken down or become cross-wired; that

... instead of facing challenges together, with a common purpose to get life on track, our automatic response is fear – crippling, disabling, panicking, knee-jerk, blame-somebody fear.

I have come to believe that fear is the clearest symptom of our flawed, failed and fallen human condition – literally our fault line.

It has come home to me with vivid freshness in this post-Easter season how typically the risen Jesus meets with people who are frightened –

his first words, actions and gestures designed to disarm and dispel fear.

The first characteristic of the Christian community is that we are learning how to banish fear by releasing hope in the power of love.

That is the pull and attraction of those dedicated to the life of Christ and making that real and actual in time – as he did when the Word became flesh 2,000 years ago.

Yet even in the church we panic in the face of fear –

will we get a Vicar, will we meet our parish share –

not just in the parish but in the diocese, too – here we are one third into the year with less than a quarter of income received (investments down, interest in free fall and new expenses awaited for child protection and pension support) yet every priest has been paid a stipend to date – but how big will the shortfall be?

Times are uncertain – but fear is not the response of those whose locked-door response needs to be made aware of the risen Christ who enters to show his hands and side.

The living truth of God made visible, accessible, and beautiful in every village and town and city – wherever his name is known, honoured, worshiped and shared.

As each part is working properly
to promote the body's growth
in building itself up in love.

What are the component parts of the Church of England?

Primary building block is the parish. The parish system emerged 1,000 years ago as a strategic response to changing England. The parish fixes locality, defines place, guarantees belonging and enables Church to be present – incarnate.

Parish is geographical unit, living community, rooted, pivotal point in a networking society. The parish has a story, distinctiveness, memory, tradition. It is a memory bank of change.

Every parish has two Churchwardens – ideally – elected by the parish, not the membership – and holders of the Bishop's trust as his officers.

Churchwardens are a vital check and balance mechanism to ensure that the parish church belongs to the people and is a vibrant part of his provision for inclusive, energising, participative worship.

What an awesome responsibility; thank you.

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Churchwardens work with Church Councils as ex officio members – PCCs, when their role is properly articulated, express the reality that the Church is the People of God – a healthy church celebrates the priesthood of all believing people. Their stewardship of all that makes for rounded, wholesome church life – fostering the whole mission of the church, pastoral, evangelistic, social, and ecumenical,

with careful handling of finances –

means that in each place is a well ordered centre of worship and mission.

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Then there is an army who keep the grounds in good order, clean the interior, add the colourful creativity of flowers, maintain gutters and downspouts, provide a welcome, hand out the books, organise rotas, produce parish magazine, brew the coffee and furnish generous tables for parish do's (my waistline is testimony!

What an army thank you.

Add to these ordained local ministers, non-stipendiary/self-supporting ministers, retired clergy still active in their lifelong vocation, Readers, Elders, lesson readers, intercessors, Mother's Union, Lay Pastors, Communion ministrants, organists, choir, music groups and Friends.

What gifts and imagination; thank you.

What an enviable infra-structure.

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All that is without mentioning stipendiary clergy.

Currently we have 143 places for incumbents – by 2018 our division of the available national pot will fall to 130.

Currently we group parishes into benefices under the leadership of Rector, Vicar or Priest-in-charge. The buck stops here post!

Oversight of more than one place affects what oversight means – when the benefice is three four, five, eight, being priestly begins to militate against bureaucracy and stifle pastoral or missional enterprise.

130 into 479 just does not go!

So in the future our stipendiary clergy will be deployed differently. A different sort of ministry which will try to keep valued ingredients of the past – availability, accessibility,

approachability, a trusted pastor, friend, mentor, guide and teacher – but not the hands-on multi-competent, ubiquitous ‘sifter’ through whom everything needs to go.

In my time as Vicar I have been consulted on every detail of parish life = asked by experienced, godly church-people “is it alright if I”, “do you approve of” “we won’t do it if you disagree (though we’ve been doing it for centuries, Vicar)”

We pay a stipend so that someone can equip the people of God to be precisely that, where they are – mind and heart attuned to seeking the will of God and promoting the glorious Gospel of maturity in Christ.

We’ve pinned both too much and too little on stipendiary priests – too much micro-detail, too little confidence in their vocation and training to prepare Christ’s followers for confident fulfilment of their God-given baptismal-calling in church and world.

Building church – the active, verb of the Bishop’s challenge – which is coming out to you in June....

... is about putting together a lively community of women and men, young and old, who value the local gather, cooperate for the good of the mission, being kept together under one leader, expressed in the Bishop’s office, exploring the truth that will set us free as we explore ancient texts and seek where the Spirit, like the wind, doth blow.

Building church is everything to do with the Diocese, operating centrally, coming out to the church locally to say “this is where it is; how can we support?”

We will need looser confederations – at local, deanery and diocesan level.

The benefice may become less self-consciously a discrete unit and more a flexible, expanding unit of mission and ministry.

You may hear more about Minster Models – key churches defined by their location, or landscape significance, or tourist appeal or viable local economy – where we put-in lead priests, chosen because of their ability to deal with complex organisms and structures – able to handle resources of people and money and buildings, collaboratively, so that these are used across the piece.

Whether we call them Minsters in Suffolk matters not a lot – what is important is that we must attract good lead priests who can lead this vast army into a confident future.

We may have fewer stipendiary clergy, but we have more ministers at our disposal than ever before – and over 20,000 who pray and give and serve, each in their own way.

We have an exciting future ahead. We will lose nothing save those things which hold us back.

We will need to adapt – deaneries, group ministries or larger benefices might become indistinguishable - even a single unit.

You may not be able to put a cigarette paper between Deanery Synod and Benefice or Group Council – but you will be able to claim is that your local congregation, parish church, distinctive identity is a basic, valued building block of the Church in St Edmundsbury & Ipswich – and nothing can gainsay that.

This year's charge is about banishing fear, seizing hope and going forward with that confidence which is born of resurrection truth.

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What is before us in this year of building church and on towards our diocesan centenary 2014 is the re-emergence, even reinvention, but most certainly the revitalisation of the local church. But we have to find the language and we have to discuss honestly.

The future is ours; now is the time; together we can rise to the challenge, each playing a part ...

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The rural evangelist bought a handsome beast of a horse – he had much ground to cover of his hilly territory.

“Remember” said the trainer “he responds to just two instructions - to go with a will command ‘praise the Lord’ to come to halt declare ‘amen!’”

Our eager missionary set off, from trot to canter. He was praying about his next sermon, seeking divine inspiration. Suddenly, he realised he was approaching a cliff edge with sheer drop.

Panic grew as he failed to recall the command to halt ... dearly beloved, alleluia, hosanna, glory be “God help me” he passionately prayed “amen” and the horse came to a stop right on the edge.

Relieved, thankful, full of spontaneous praise he shouted “praise the Lord.”

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