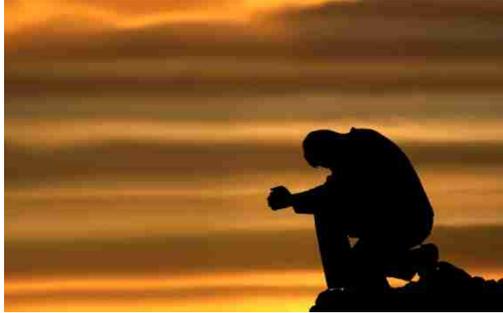


James writes...

It all takes time



Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' and I said, 'Hear am I; send me!' (Isaiah 6.8)

It is good to be here at St John's! Thank you for your generous welcome. I am thankful to God for calling me here, and the licensing service (48 hours ago, as I write) was a deep inspiration. I am amazed at the range of people and gifts within our Church family, our wide-ranging local connections, and the vital potential for further growth in mission.

The above quotation, from Isaiah's calling, was cited by Bishop David on 12th June. On one level it sounds clear-cut: Isaiah enthusiastically responds to God's call. In reality, of course, as the Bishop pointed out, Isaiah's response was more complex, including an awareness of his own inadequacy and an initial fear of taking on such a daunting task. I feel just the same! Both excited and privileged to be here, but also fully aware of my own inadequacies and daunted by the scale of the task. So please bear with me...

In reality, of course, all of us are called by God (as those recently confirmed were reminded: 'God has called you by name and made you his own.'). And those whom God calls - the whole people of God - he graciously equips for the tasks he wants us to fulfil. Nonetheless **the real journey of responding to God takes time**... It involves dedicated hard work, continuous learning, both joy and sorrow, the capacity to change, and unceasing openness to receive. Thankfully God is very patient, such that regular false starts are not an insurmountable barrier! As Churchill famously commented, *'To improve is to change; to be perfect is to change often.'*

The immediate *context of my arrival* at St John's could not have been more apt, in terms of this message - that responding to God takes time. May I share it with you?

Having celebrated my farewell at Great Bowden in early May, the period 'in-between' fell within the season 'from Easter to Pentecost'. This is always a poignant time of celebrating the resurrection and (especially after the Ascension) awaiting the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Specifically I began my 'in-between' time on retreat at a monastery in West Yorkshire: 'fully open to God'. This was followed by moving house, which also coincided with 'Prayer48': what a brilliant weekend to arrive in Cambridge... among other activities, spending a night in prayer at St

John's was an experience I'll never forget. And just prior to my licensing, I led a pilgrimage (with 30 people from my last parish) to Northumberland 'in the footsteps of the northern saints'. This was a profound reminder of the 'presence of God' all around us, and his intimate call for us to follow him afresh.

This leads me to reflect, in general terms, on the fact that assuming leadership (as Priest in Charge) at St John's is genuinely going to take time. This is not an evasion of responsibility, but a mature recognition that we all need to allow time and space for the next stage of Christian life to emerge. We need to remember that, at heart, it's God's work and we are merely co-workers with God. *So what might the elements of this initial journey look like, especially as I settle-in locally?*

Firstly, it is about you and I getting to know each other, and this takes time. True relationship doesn't happen overnight. It involves sharing our stories and history, listening to our joys and struggles, and allow our true identity to emerge. And just a word about part of my 'story', as a former curate of this parish. I would urge those who 'know' me from the past to disregard the fact, as I'm a different person from the one I was 15 years ago, and you've changed too!

Secondly, I am keen to hear about your perspective on what is good about St John's as a place to belong and to worship, as well as your sense of our limitations and how God might be calling us to journey forward into the future. Healthy communities are open to sharing both strengths and weaknesses, with the maturity not to feel undermined by self-analysis. We do however need to be kind-hearted and sensitive, respecting of others' views. So I invite you to share with me your own insights, at the right moment.

Thirdly, and this is perhaps most important of all, we need (in this initial stage of a new chapter) to be deeply rooted in prayer. I shall be speaking more about this, but suffice it to say that prayer is the foundation of everything, and if Christians really pray in depth, the results will be greater than we can imagine. I am deeply thankful for the first two years of 'Prayer48', which is already bearing fruit. However I also sense that God is (at this time) inviting us to go deeper, to 'strengthen the foundations' of our Christian faith - to build on 'Prayer48'. I look forward to exploring a number of exciting ways in which we can deepen our prayer life, as well as teaching more about prayer.

Fourthly, we need, accepting our life-giving diversity (of age and culture and experience), to operate as one body: the Body of Christ in this place. This means, over time, continuing to build a strong and nurturing Christian community, encouraging one another's gifts and seeking to discern our next steps in faith. Again, I look forward to being part of this journey, and together to finding ways to listen to what God might be saying to us, at this moment.

Fifthly, as Bishop David challenged us, we need to be prepared - alongside 're-pitching our tent' and welcoming others in - to take his light out into dark places, beyond the church. In other words, we need (into the future) to strengthen our mission and service of the wider community. As a Franciscan I'm drawn to the various ways in which St John's could reach out further, 'in love and service' - as we seek to be 'generous and visible people of Jesus Christ'; a commitment which invariably results in church growth, as people see the light of Christ reflected in

and through us. This will involve serious prayer, discernment and with an eye on sustainability.

On my prayer table at home I have a card with the words: '*I want to be truly open to God - completely, entirely, radically, open...*' As I begin as Priest in Charge, and as we take time to get to know each other, and respond afresh to God's call, my prayer is that each of us might dare to be 'truly, completely and radically open' to the voice of God.

I look forward to *taking time* - to encounter one another, listen, deepen our prayer, love and encourage, and reaching out with the light of Jesus Christ.