

17. Presentation by the Vicar at the APCM 17th March 2024

We are impatient people – I know I am. Impatience is human nature, but it isn't how God's Kingdom works.

In the Kingdom of God, growth is slow, sometimes so slow that we can't always see it. It makes me think of how flowers burst into bloom. Many of us will have spring flowers in our gardens somewhere – we have lots here at church. It takes an awfully long time for a bulb to become a flower. That's why we find it so fascinating when we see those timelapse videos that show the whole thing in about 30 seconds. They remind us of the incredible journey each individual plant takes.

Over the last few weeks, a number of people have shared with me that they feel as if Christ Church is, like those plants, slowly beginning to grow. There is a sense that the green shoots of life are beginning to be seen around us. We are welcoming more people to church, and even though our Electoral Roll number has dropped slightly, the size of our worshipping community has increased. Last Christmas saw us welcome hundreds of people to hear the story God coming to live with us. We've heard already how God's blessing of our finances last year has enabled us to keep doing the vital mission and ministry we know we are called to do: Coffee Stop, Oasis, Messy church, Play Café, the Community Pantry, to name but a few. God's provision means we can continue to share the Gospel in both word and deed.

There's a sense that our position within the community is becoming increasingly important. We now have someone from Christ Church on the governing board of each of the three village schools, and our work with schools has grown considerably in the last year. We have a member of the church family on the planning committee for Heath Fest, the village music event, and have been heavily involved with the village Christmas event, Easter trail, and other moments in the life of the community. Someone used the word 'tentacles' to describe how we are slowly reaching out to the community we serve, and I think that's a pretty good analogy.

People are growing in their faith as well: we have celebrated baptisms within the church family in recent months, and the number from outside church asking about baptism is gently increasing, albeit from a very low level. Our preaching helps us connect our faith with the rest of our lives, our home groups provide pastoral support and a place to go deeper, and Alpha is there to help people discover the Christian faith. There's a huge amount to give thanks for, these green shoots we see all around us. And thank you, of course, for all you do to nurture and care for these shoots.

But, of course, they are still just shoots. And my sense is that we, like all good gardeners, are moving into a season where we are being called to carefully care for, look after, and tend to these shoots. Let me be clear: it is God who does the growing. He is the gardener. We can't make them grow, but we can be ready to play our part when God calls us to. So what does that look like for 2024? There are three priorities that, for me, are at the heart of God's call on us as a church in the coming year.

Firstly, we must protect, encourage growth, and bring to life the green shoots of our **work with children, youth, and families**. We need to be praying faithfully, regularly, and passionately for God to do a mighty thing here. If you aren't already, please join me in

praying for a doubling of our children and young people, and their families, over the rest of this year.

There is widespread recognition across the church that we need to act fast. Bishop Steven, talking to the Oxford Diocesan Synod last weekend, said that we cannot wait another year to take action. All churches in the Diocese have been asked to form a plan, in the next few months, to increase their engagement with children and young people. I want to be clear: we love and serve the church family we have across all ages, and nothing will change here. I take great joy in being part of a church that spans decades when it comes to age and wisdom. But if we don't grow younger, then the green shoots will die back until there isn't anything left.

To that end, we have put in for funding to employ a Children's Minister for three years, someone to come and work with the green shoots that we are seeing. This work requires deep investment – investment of money, resource, and above all prayer. And it cannot rest on one person's shoulders – we'll all need to get involved. Again, I urge you to pray.

Secondly, but closely connected in a way I hope you can see, in 2024 we need be **wise stewards of what God has given to us**. God blessed us immensely last year: when I tell people that what was projected as being a £35k shortfall ended up a £35k surplus, their jaws hit the floor. But we mustn't get complacent because mission and ministry cost us. If we do employ a Children's Minister, we will be paying £17.5k for three years. At the end of those three years, we will need to be in a position where we can support that role fully from our finances. That means increasing our income – and of course, there is other mission and ministry we will want to support in that time as well.

I do not want to squeeze those who are already giving generously: God never calls us to give at the expense of our health. But we do need to continue to seek God as to how we use our money, how we give our money, and how we share our money.

Thirdly, I believe we are being called to **take our faith outside the walls of the church**, so that we might see many hear the Gospel and come to faith. I'm a big believer in the value of church buildings, and what happens in them, but I truly believe God is calling us to get out there and share our faith. There is favour over us as a church at this time, and we must use that for the benefit of God's Kingdom.

The easy thing would be for this to become top down: I come up with some ideas and ask people to do them. There's a place for that, of course, but can I challenge to all to ask yourselves this question: what can I do to take the love of God out of the church, and into the community around me? If you need something to help you do this, come and tell me. If you want to learn how to do this, come and ask me. On an average Sunday, 130 of us gather for worship. That's 130 people who can, in the rest of the week, shine the light of Christ into the lives of others. Let's make it a priority to take the love of God with us wherever we go, and not be afraid to share the hope that is within us, so that many might come to know and love God for themselves.

As I close, I want us to pray into those three areas. On your seats is a card with all three priorities on one side, and then on the other, one of those priorities. In a minute, I'm going to ask you to split into groups of 3 or 4, and pray for the one priority that's on that side of

the card. Then when you get home, stick the card up somewhere with either one or all the priorities showing, and commit to praying for us in the year ahead. Thank you.