

St Mark's, Armagh
Annual General Vestry Report
Tuesday 19th March 2024

Reading : John 3v1-17

This reading recorded a conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus. Just how many overheard we cannot know, but if there were hearers of what was said in this conversation, there must have been just a few. John tells us that this conversation happened at night, presumably so that Nicodemus could meet with Jesus in relative secrecy. His fellow Pharisees may not have been so open to what Jesus had to say and indeed in time, some of the Pharisees were of course involved in the plot against Jesus which paved the way to his cross. But what was said in this, and perhaps following conversations certainly had a significant impression upon Nicodemus. I am not aware of him being mentioned again in the Gospels, until John 19 where we read of Joseph of Arimathea asking Pilate for Jesus body after his death on the cross and then he and Nicodemus preparing him for burial and laying him in the tomb. Nicodemus had met with Jesus under the cloak of darkness, after Jesus' death, bravely became known for being a disciple.

In recent weeks I have greatly enjoyed conversations with several young men, whom I arranged to meet for personal conversations, only to be inspired by their personal professions of faith and sharing with me of how they speak freely amongst their friends about their faith. The conversations that I shared with these young men inspired me immensely. As someone who serves in the ministry of the Church in such a public fashion, people ask me about my faith regularly. But for these young men, in their situations and so open about their faith, surely their conversations will have significant benefit for the Kingdom. May the people of this Parish be involved in conversations that spark living faith and the extension of Christ's Kingdom.

Since meeting last year, we have had quite a year of activity which I shall try and summarize as quickly as I can during this annual report.

In the week following last year's Easter Vestry we journeyed through Holy Week and Easter which included the the Maundy Thursday Service and meal, as well as the 3 Hours Service, the Diocesan Easter Dawn Service at the Argory, and the breakfast that followed in the Crozier Hall.

On Sunday 7th May we hosted a special service to commemorate the Coronation of The King, someone we continue to pray for amidst his current ill health. During June we held our Children's Day which was followed by a sunny afternoon in the Palace Grounds for a

Parish Picnic, as well as a Parish BBQ followed by a short quiz, and in the same month we played our annual cricket match with our friends from The Mall Presbyterian Church. We retained the trophy, but more importantly this is always this was a really lovely evening of fun and friendship together.

On June 30th a group from our Parish, along with friends, travelled to Portglenone to attend Summer Madness. With a group consisting of 25 people, there is a fair amount of strategy involved, but we are used to it now and our group were all lovely, so it was a reasonably relaxed experience! Summer Madness is an ideal opportunity for the kinds of conversations mentioned earlier. I believe we should do whatever we can to encourage young people along to this year's event beginning on June 28th.

After a restful July, August included the 'Epic Explorers' Holiday Bible Club here in the Crozier Hall. Last year the Holiday Bible Club was led by Sarah and Hannah Irvine, ably assisted by what become an experienced Holiday Bible Club team. This August, however, the team dynamic will be quite changed as both Sarah and Hannah will be on maternity leave! We are delighted for them both. We are very excited for both couples and wait with great anticipation for the sharing of happy news. With regards to this summer's Holiday Bible Club we are very grateful to Clare Speers for stepping up into the key leader role and would like to assure her of all the support that we can offer as we look forward to Holy Bible Club which will begin on 12th August.

On Thursday 31st August, Barbara Wilson launched a new publication entitled 'Choose Joy'. This is a wonderful book which draws from her personal experience of battling with cancer and offers immense hope and joy that arises from her personal Christian faith. I know that 'Choose Joy' will offer immense encouragement to all who read it and it was delightful to see such a crowd in the hall for the launch.

September saw the reactivation of many of our Parish initiatives including the monthly 'The Well' Service and the 1st Tuesday monthly Holy Communion Service, both relatively new initiatives which I believe have been good additions to our Parish Programme.

5 aside Football another relatively new initiative for anyone of 18 years and older and I wish to thank Mark Speers for arranging what is always an enjoyable hour up in the Orchard Leisure Centre. Monday night football has never been specified a men's only opportunity, but it has been an activity only attended by men so far. To add to the great work of the Marksmen which is now led by Graham Lavery, it is hoped that an occasional informal event for men will be run in our parish to correspond to the ladies' Alive group which Sarah very conscientiously leads.

On Tuesday 26th September, we gathered in St Mark's to give thanks for the life of Rev'd Canon John McKegney. John was Rector of this Parish for 23 years and was a much loved Pastor and respected member of our local community. As well as Rector, he was a Rural Dean, a Canon of our local Cathedral, an active member of several Diocesan committees, Chairman of the Armstrong Primary School Board of Governors and a prominent figure in

the Southern Education and Library Board. In illness John demonstrated remarkable strength. He was very open about what he faced and amidst his struggles, he often spoke of the peace that he knew through his faith in Christ.

As a Church family may we continue to remember all of John's loved ones in prayer, especially his partner Karen, his son and daughter, Patrick and Ruth. May all who know sorrow, also know comfort and peace.

The 3rd weekend of October is our traditional time for Harvest Thanksgiving Services and again we combined our traditional decorations with items of food for the food bank. Last year's Harvest Services involved Very Rev'd Sam Wright of Lisburn Cathedral, a former Curate of St Mark's and current Bishop of Clogher, Rt Rev'd Ian Ellis, as well as Rev'd Paul Lyons who has family connections with our Parish. A Saturday morning Ladies Harvest Breakfast was organised by Sarah and a team of helpers and involved Rev'd Emma Gibson from Magheralin Parish. It was a very encouraging weekend added to by a joyful choir to help us give thanks to God for his goodness.

Also during October, Milan became second to Armagh for style as 'Fashion for Fall' took place in the Crozier Hall. This event was masterfully organised by Caroline Nesbitt and her team of volunteers and involved models from our Parish and clothing from local businesses. This event was a lot of fun and immensely enjoyed by everyone who attended and took part!

Having just referred to a Food Bank collection, I would like to thank all who have supported our monthly Drive Through Drop Off appeals for the Food. Special thanks are to be extended to John McCann, Ian Millar and Kenneth Latham for their help with the Drive Through Drop Off. Our parishioners have been more than generous with their support of the Food Bank. The list of our annual Mission and Charity Contributions is offered in our financial report, but added to this is our annual Christmas Toy Appeal donations which were distributed via Belfast Central Mission. I believe that ours is a generous Parish and for that I am thankful. Thank you sincerely to all who support our Parish financially and helped us not only to pay our bills, but share what we have, as we have done in the past year.

November's activities included the annual Shopping Trip to Kildare which I know many of the ladies from our Parish and their friends looked forward to. Thanks are extended to Florence for not only arranging this very enjoyable event, but also connecting us with the Adoro Choir who performed an outstanding concert in St Mark's during December entitled 'Silent Night'. We are delighted that Adoro intend to return to St Mark's this December and know that given the amazing response to last December's concert, tickets will be eagerly sought after this Christmas.

Returning to November, we also held our annual Service of Light and Remembrance, during which families, whose loved ones' funerals were led by Parish Clergy during the year past, were especially remembered in prayer. Caring for those who are bereaved is a priority of

our Parish and we are incredibly grateful to our Parish Nurse, Dr Bob Brown, and to those who assist him in offering the Bereavement Journey course during January and February. Arising out of last year's Bereavement Journey, Bob has developed a new initiative entitled Café Hope which is intended for people struggling with loss, of any kind, to be able to come along and know that there is a listening ear here on Wednesday afternoons. In what we offer, as a Parish we continue to hope that we can encourage a sense of support, comfort and hope amidst the sorrow and struggles of loss.

During the evening of Thursday 7th December this hall and to the front of it was a hive of activity during the Christmas Market. Like last year, the Christmas Market was organised by Sarah and again she put her heart and soul into it. It was delightful to see her hard work paying off and so many people enjoying themselves.

Being associated with local schools is a distinct pleasure of ministry here and I am a member of the Armstrong Primary and Royal School Armagh's Board of Governors. Sarah and I, as well as four of our Parish Members, are part of the Drelincourt School Governors. Sarah and I participate in School Assemblies and as a Parish we hosted the Royal School Armagh's Speech night last September and in January the Royal's Scripture Union Celebrate Service also took place.

Our connection with schools was also evidenced in the approach to Christmas by hosting a Carol Service attended by many Primary schools in aid of the NI Cancer Fund for Children. We also hosted the City of Armagh High School and the annual Armstrong Primary Carol Services.

As always the Church looked wonderful for Christmas with perhaps the most beautiful tree ever seen in St Mark's. We continue to thank David Mansbridge for his preparations of the Church for this and every event in the church year. On Christmas Eve we enjoyed our Sunday School Nativity Service and the choir sang beautifully at our Nine Lessons and Carols Service. Carol Singers were also out and about in the community in the approach to Christmas.

As we entered a new year, our Day of Prayer was a very special occasion where people came in good number to pray about the themes personal, local and global encouraged by our displays. Unfortunately I missed out on this occasion due to having Covid at that time, but I know from speaking to those who attended that it was a very worthwhile day. During October past we also held a half day of prayer specifically for peace in Gaza and Israel, Ukraine and other places of conflict. A very moving moment for me was having met someone for a conversation in the Clergy Vestry during the Prayer for Peace Day, I stepped out to find the Marksmen all Choir Stalls praying. It was a sight that truly warmed my heart and we continue to pray for peace in places of immense complexity and suffering.

During February, the Marriage Preparation Course was offered in this room over 4 Monday evenings. This year it was particularly encouraging to offer this course to some participants

who travelled great distances after work to be here. I continue to believe that this is a really important initiative and it is really good that we are in a position to be able to offer it.

Offering 'The Well' Café Church continues to be very worthwhile. At times there have been around 30 worshippers here in this room which is very encouraging. Sarah has been commended on a number of occasions and to this end, I wish to thank you again.

It seems clear now that some areas of church life will not recover to pre Covid levels. In many ways we have to be realistic and just move on. I have given up lamenting about the past and determined to seek to be thankful for what we have, pray hard and work hard, and long for more conversations like I mentioned earlier. There is spiritual life amidst the challenge of our new societal reality. I pray that more and more we will see new fruit for the Kingdom of God, here in this place.

In his report which I shared with you, the Treasurer has already highlighted our a need for financial expediency and to this end a fundraising committee has met and will meet again after Easter to consider opportunities to run events which people greatly enjoy and have the added benefit of raising funds. So please watch this space and if you have any ideas, please do bring them along to our next meeting on Thursday 11th April. The Select Vestry has created a Finance Committee who will endeavour to look at expenditure and seek to reduce costs where we can, but also consider options for how we can raise income. A letter from the Treasurer will accompany the Parish Financial Report when it is circulated, seeking to encourage more giving where possible.

I have already mentioned Dr Bob Brown's active service as a Parish Nurse and it is a delight now to be able to hear him preach as an outcome of his ministry as a Diocesan Reader. I would like to thank Bob for his ministry as a Parish Nurse, which I know is very much appreciated, and also to thank him now for his Sunday ministry not only in St Mark's, but across the Diocese.

As we are approaching Holy Week the Parish Choir have been practising on Wednesday nights and we are incredibly grateful to Mrs Edna Mullan for leading choir practices in recent times. As well as Edna we would like to thank our team of musicians who lead us in our sung worship which currently include :- Mrs Janice Nicholl and Mr Graham Brown, as well as Mrs Clare and Mr Mark Speers who lead our music group. Thank you to choir and worship group members for their willing contribution to our services.

I also want to offer a public and very sincere thank you to Keith Ruddy and the livestream team for all that they do in the gallery, Sunday by Sunday. The livestream equipment was updated during the year past thanks to a generous donation, but also enabled us to improve the toilet facilities in the church. For both improvements, I, and we, are most grateful and pleased.

To all Parish Organisation leaders, thank you one and all. It is well recognised that in many walks of life, the availability of volunteers has been an issue. To everyone who sacrifices their time and offers their gifts for the activities of this Parish, thank you one and all.

On behalf of the Select Vestry, I would like to thank Mr Ian Millar for his diligent work as a Parish Hon Secretary. We continue to express appreciation to Mr Arnold Courtney for his continued wise counsel in the application of our Parish finances. Our Glebe Wardens have been busy as usual this year and have offered their characteristic attentiveness to our Parish Properties. Thank you to Don and to Don. And indeed to all of our Select Vestry Members, thank you one and all. As I have said before, you are a pleasure to work with and our Parish is very faithfully served by its Select Vestry.

As a Select Vestry we have had a number of projects that we have discussed and attended to during the past year. A significant cause for concern has been below the pews on the ground floor where an expert's report has indicated that we have issues arising from a lack of ventilation below the flooring. We are seeking the best approach to remedy this situation and hope that work can progress in the near future. The Mall entrance to our church continues to cause us concern and we would very much like to improve the entrance to our beautiful driveway. A new door has been fitted to the Curatage which hopefully has improved heat retention. The Church Fire Alarm has been problematic, but thankfully it seems to be behaving of late! There have been various other maintenance jobs which the Select Vestry have attentively seen to.

I would like to pay tribute to our outgoing Church Wardens, Mrs Valerie McCann and Mr Gareth Liggett, who have fantastic Church Wardens. Your willingness to offer your very best is truly appreciated and I know that you will very much encourage your successors as you train them up this Sunday and next.

Mr David Mansbridge, continues to offer incredible diligence as our Parish Sexton and we are immensely grateful to him for all of his work in keeping our Church, Hall and grounds as beautifully kept as they can be.

Again, I would like to commend Sarah's work during the past year and am so grateful for all that she brings to our Parish's ministry. As a Parish we were just delighted with the news of Sarah and Daniel expecting a little one and we wish them every happiness blessing as a family for the future. Sarah and Daniel's son or daughter will be blessed in their Mum, Dad and Grand Parents too.

Caroline continues to offer an immense service to our Parish and is still my go to person for asking who is related to who! Caroline's list of jobs is very varied. Amongst other jobs, today I saw her filling in a Baptism Form for a Parishioner, she was also putting the finishing touches to this Parish Report and getting some practicalities in place for tonight. Thursday is another day with a very different list of jobs to do. Caroline works incredibly hard and I

would like to thank her for her endeavour, good humour and listening ear when parishioners call into the office.

As I conclude, as always I would like to do so by thanking my family for their patience and their support. It is not easy being the wife or children of a Rector, but they cope really well!

But above all, may we thank our Lord Jesus, who gives us the collective privilege of service, and knowing Him as Lord and friend. May we have conversations about him and in everything we do be for his glory.