

Pastoral letter



Stanley Spencer, *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1924-27) © Tate

Easter

'Now the green blade riseth' is probably my favourite Easter hymn. Set to the French carol melody, Noël Nouvelet, its minor key reminds us that loss has given rise to the new order of reality revealed in the resurrection of Christ. This is reflected also in the hymn's text: the green blade shoots forth from the seed that was previously planted (John 12.23-24; 1 Cor 15.37-38).

Despite my fifty years on this planet, I hadn't realised that the start of spring coincides with a phenomenon in our solar system. Spring arrives with the spring *equinox*, the day on which there is an 'equal night', that is, that the length of the night is equal to the length of the day. This year, that is 20 March; and this day promises, with more exposure to the light and heat of the sun day by day for the next six months, that things will start to warm up as the days get longer.

I'm encouraged that there are some green shoots at St Lawrence's this spring. We have a band of twelve volunteers who have taken on **church cleaning**. It is great to see the impact of their work in a clean church, but also to have a group committed to each other working on the church site. Sue Worker – who has cleaned the church toilet for many years with faithfulness – now has companions in her tasks. Look at the **children's area** and you will not only see children's work on display which celebrates the presence of the youngest members of this community with their skills and talents, but you will also see that there are now labelled draws with various creative and play items. Our pilot **house church** is now meeting regularly and with the help of Fr Dioynisius is developing a sense of its own identity and purpose. We at last have a second contractor coming to look at the **Cooper crucifix**, which will mean that we have two tenders for the work and enough information to pass on to the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) to get permission for its restoration and re-hanging. I'm delighted that Silje Ommundsen has responded positively to my invitation to consider being our new **Parish Safeguarding Officer**. We have yet to go through the paperwork and formal process of appointment, but I hope that it will be possible to have her in role in the next month or so. You will remember Silje and Kenny from the joyful baptism of their children Maya and Leah which took place recently in our worship. I have found delight in visits from **local primary schools** over recent weeks, directed to supporting their **Religious Education** provision. Children ask the right but difficult questions

like, “How can there be an end of time?” and “Where is heaven?” I love engaging with and answering these honest but stretching asks. Having been asked to lead **Easter assemblies** at Coteford Infants and Coteford Juniors, I see green shoots in these connections with our local community. I have been glad to work with Eleanor Maxwell and Elaine Delfino **preparing the May Fair for Monday 6 May**, along with Liz Chandler who is handing over this responsibility and Judith who is weight-bearing in liaising with many of the individuals involved.

These green shoots are encouraging, suggesting new life in our church community. As with spring eventually giving way to summer, this progression doesn't happen by itself, but requires longer days of sunlight: light and warmth. As the seed being buried in the earth gives rise to new life, so it is the commitment of members of the congregation and clergy which will allow these green shoots to come to fruition.

The Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM) is always a key moment in the parish's year, as it allows us to take stock of where we have been and provides for the church community to offer new and refreshed leadership that will allow the next stage of parish life to grow and flourish. This year, **the APCM will be on Sunday 28 April** following the main Eucharist. Please read carefully my report on 2023 when the papers are made available to you.

A group within the parish has been asked to prepare a Parish Profile and Person Specification for **the parish's next incumbent**. Douglas Paterson is chairing the group; its members are Barbara Williams, Caroline Chinondo, Lindsay Baxter, Sarah Taylor, Darren Fletcher, Barry Chandler and Judith Howe. The group has important decisions to make as to the parish's current priorities: is the priority to 'keep things ticking over' and maintain the congregation, or does the next incumbent need to have the skill set and be positioned and supported to take the parish to a place in which its mission is sustainable, spirituality, financially, and in the parish's connections with the local community. The group's conclusions will need to come back to the PCC in this last stage of the parish's interim process. The next step will be going out to look for an incumbent, but not before the parish has enough lay leadership capacity in place to support an incumbent's work.

If there were not enough reason with this for this year's APCM and election of Churchwardens and PCC members to be important, there are other pressures which will demand energy from members of the congregation. **Jenny A' Court will be on extended leave from June to October inclusive** (five months). Jenny's work is vital not only to generating income but also to our connections and good relationships with the local community. Further, early this year, bishop Lusa approved that **I will be on a three-month period of study leave from September to November inclusive**. Clergy are entitled to take three month's sabbatical leave after each ten years' ministry; this year will be my eighteenth since starting ministry without a previous sabbatical. The time will allow me to ensure that the work I did for my doctorate starts to have an impact on faith-based education in schools and how they understand their task and purpose. I will be in Grand Rapids, Michigan at Calvin University and plan to draft a book whilst I am there as well as contributing to an academic conference.

The temporary administrator who replaces Jenny will need support in their work. The reality of my work as it stands is that I spend more than half of my time dealing with administrative issues and maintenance tasks on site. These are areas that the PCC should be leading on and managing. In my fifth year in this post, with the investment I have given, it is not unreasonable to think that St Lawrence's should be edging its way towards being able to stand on its own feet,

freeing its priest to lead on pastoral ministry for the congregation and missional engagement with the local community.

Our current PCC is significantly under-powered. The parish has only half of number of PCC members it should have for a congregation of its size. The parish has been without churchwardens for two years now (there should be two). We have no representatives for Deanery Synod (there should be four), meaning that in addition to a lack of capacity in the PCC, we also miss out on vital connections with local churches. There are three other PCC places that are not currently filled, with a fourth arising as Robert Hinson completes the maximum number of years' permissible service this year. Therefore **there are a total of ten places open on the PCC:** for two churchwardens; four deanery synod reps and four lay representatives of the congregation.

Filling the PCC is not a numbers game: it is about having people's time and commitment to enable St Lawrence's to maintain its day-to-day life and to engage in its mission, which is so vital not only to the energy and flourishing of the congregation, building a sense of community, but to the well-being and understanding of the people who live in this parish. It is for the congregation to elect members to the PCC, churchwardens amongst them; and so **it is for every member of the congregation to think whether they – or someone they know – might serve in this way.**

Our most pressing and immediate needs relate to site management and supporting events, including worship. The parish needs to have two to three people available to be on site, each for two to three days a week. The role might mean taking responsibility for managing and overseeing a contractor's (or volunteer's) work; it might mean being the 'lead person' in the church warden role to support an act of worship; it might mean doing some heavy-duty gardening or DIY, or identifying tasks in these areas and leading others in their delivery; it might mean providing refreshments, turning the lights and heating on, and supporting AV for a visiting group using the church. The Outreach committee has been without a chair for a year. Important connections with local businesses and charities are at risk of being lost without someone to lead on this work. Could any of these roles be for you?

I've described some of the green shoots coming up in our common life. We need now to give these shoots in the parish's life the light, water and warmth they need to grow. Growing the PCC with people who can undertake these key roles and who can prepare for an incumbent to be appointed to the parish are the next steps. Who do you know who can do these things?

As we enter Holy Week, I look forward to wishing you a very happy Easter when it arrives!

Fr. John
