Vicar’s Report for 2021

So what can we say about 2021 – well, to use the well-known phrase – it was a bit like the curate’s egg, good in parts. Actually, to be honest, it wasn’t just good in parts, it was amazing and wonderful, and the good certainly outweighed the not so good.

The return to in person worship in time for Easter was truly awesome and uplifting, enhanced by the amazing and inspirational singing of Thine be the Glory in the churchyard of All Saints. What a witness to the community and what an amazing way to declare the Risen Christ.

We had the joy of having 2 weddings in the parish, as well as a marriage blessing, and also welcomed 2 families as they brought their children to be baptised.

Although Covid has seriously impacted on our schools, I attended both schools in July to say goodbye to the year 6 leavers, and also Gill, the West Dean Head who retired. We welcomed the children of West Dean into St Andrew’s for their Harvest Festival and I visited Singleton School to lead their Harvest Worship. Both schools collected generously for the food bank which, added to our own collections, provided much needed resources for the overstretched service.

I have also been able to lead collective worship several times in each school, and met with both heads on a regular basis.

Christmas at the schools was again affected by Covid, with no services in church, but I did join the children of West Dean at the college to meet Father Christmas and to receive their presents.

Within the parish, the St Roche’s day service was again held in the churchyard at Singleton, where we were joined by the amazing brass quintet, and also welcomed the Duke and Dowager Duchess of Richmond.

Remembrance Sunday saw the traditional services in West Dean and Singleton and we were joined in the morning by pupils and staff from West Dean who laid a wreath, and in the afternoon by pupils from Singleton, one of whom read at the service.

Remembrance had also been marked earlier in the year when members of the Royal Sussex Regimental Association gathered for a short service at the grave of Levi Sherwin, on the centenary of his death.

Christmas saw a return of all the usual services, with Midnight Mass moved to early evening and renamed ‘the First Mass of Christmas’, and we held a Celebration of Christmas for the whole community, with favourite carols and readings to celebrate the season. Numbers at the services and the celebration were not as we had hoped, as Covid once again had an impact as people spent the time with family and friends they hadn’t seen for a while, in some cases almost 2 years.

We were unable to hold fetes again last year, but I’d like to express my grateful thanks to the fete teams who joined forces to organise the Grand Summer Raffle, sourcing wonderful prizes and working hard to sell tickets, and raising much needed funds for our churches.

On a personal level I began taking communion to several members of the parish who are housebound, and it has been a real joy to get to meet them. Sadly two have since died, but I am immensely grateful that I got to know them a little, and humbled by the love shown to them at their funeral services.

So what wasn’t quite so good, or the other half of the curates egg? Well, to put it simply. Money.

The Church has not been immune from, or unaffected by, the impact of Covid over the last 2 years. Like business and charities across the country, we continued to see a dramatic drop in our income from services and fundraising events, and we need to be realistic as to what that will mean for us in the future. But more about the future, and the finances, later in the report.

So that was the past, now what about the present. I have looked back through the service registers in each of the churches, and I am delighted to say that the Sunday numbers are back to those of pre pandemic levels. This is bucking the trend of many churches in the area which are still seeing only half to three quarters of their congregation returning, showing the strength and commitment of the worshipping community here in the Valley.

The Rector’s Ramble is now sent to 66 people across the Valley, and beyond, and is also read by many more on a regular basis in the church notice boards.

Music is, as it so often does, making a massively positive impact on our worship, with the choir returning to the first Sunday service at East Dean, led by Jeannie, and the music group growing in number and in confidence, led by Geoff and Helen, at the Family Service on the fourth Sunday at West Dean. Here I would like to thank all the musicians and vocalists, especially for offering us music and song when we were unable to sing together.

All Stars restarted, on the third Sunday, and I must offer my thanks to the Sarah’s for their hard work in preparation and their enthusiasm and commitment to engage with the children. Thanks to a generous donation from a member of the congregation, we will be able to purchase resources for the children to use in worship at the other services, hopefully strengthening their growing faith and also giving the congregation and the community hope for the future.

In order to assist the wonderful team of readers, copies of the Lectionary book, containing all the set readings have been donated to East and West Dean, joining the one already in use at Singleton.

And here again I need to thank Chris and everyone who reads and those who offer our intercessions on a Sunday morning, and Helen for assisting the children and young people who read at the family service. In representing the congregation you make our worship one that draws us all together and shows us to be a true family of faith.

In speaking about the present, I have to also offer my grateful thanks to John and Wendy. As Churchwardens theirs is often a thankless, and unnoticed, service to the church, but without their dedication and support I would not be able to fulfil my role. As well as their practical help, and knowledge, I am grateful for their advice and guidance. John works tirelessly on the day to day maintenance of the buildings, as well as working with the architect on more major projects, and so I am very grateful for his standing again this year, but this will be his last year and so I would ask all of you to consider if this valuable service, either as churchwarden or in respect of our buildings, is one that you are called to offer in service to God, and to the community of faith in this place.

So now to the future.

Firstly, the worship. I said last year that I would look to train more Lay Ministers of Communion, as well as offer a refresher for those who are already trained, but have been out of practise for the past 2 years. That is still my intention, but it is on hold until the PCC and congregation feel the time is right to return to receiving from the Common Cup.

Working with John, Geoff and Helen we plan to restart a prayer group, although we are still working on the details and its frequency and format may change, so watch this space, and the Rectors Ramble. I also plan to begin Morning Prayer in Singleton Church on a Saturday morning, to which all will be welcome.

We have two village fetes to look forward to, and also the possibility of a series of fundraising concerts in Singleton Church organised by the Parish Council. West Dean College are again using the church here for their concerts, and we hope they will use it more often, and that our links with the college will grow.

With regard to the schools, I plan, with the agreement of the Head Teachers, to put aside one Friday a month to be a school’s day. I have to thank the head teacher at West Dean for having collective worship in the morning, and the head at Singleton for having their worship in the afternoon, which makes my life, and my day, a lot easier to plan.

So there is a lot to look forward to, and a lot to be hopeful, and grateful, about.

BUT

Last year I said that we had stopped treading water and were now wading to shore. Well, sadly we have hit a little bit of a sand bank.

All 3 of our church buildings are in need of urgent work to keep them safe. Both the towers at East Dean and West Dean need work to make them secure, and the stained glass window in Singleton church needs repair and restoration to prevent more damage to the stonework and possible collapse. In total it is estimated that the work across the 3 churches will cost in the region of £250000. Some of the work can be phased, and some of the more minor issues dealt with in house, but the major works will need specialists in church conservation.

Our buildings are all beautiful, and historic, landmarks in the valley, and I know they are valued by churchgoers and none churchgoers alike, but without the urgent works being carried out in the next few years we may not be able to use them safely.

The PCC will be meeting soon to discuss what happens next, and I am hoping the Diocesan Team will be able to join them to offer advice and also practical help in grant applications and the faculty process, but they cannot do it alone. Following the meeting the PCC, working with the churchwardens, will need to prepare a plan for fundraising, and also looking at grants that may be available. In so doing they will also be looking for others in the community to join them, those who perhaps have skills in publicity, or in project managing, or in fundraising.

I don’t want to scaremonger, but we have to be realistic, and as some of this work has been outstanding for several years, it is now urgent, unless we want to be the generation who failed to treasure and conserve the heritage entrusted to us by the previous generations who have worshipped here.

An old boss of mine used to say that there are no problems, only solutions, and no challenges, only opportunities, and that is how we, the church and the wider valley community have to look at our situation now.

This is an opportunity to not only save these wonderful buildings, to not only secure worship in the valley, but also to provide for generations to come, so that Finlay, who I baptised last year, can have his wedding here in 25 years’ time, so that Mathilda and Seren who play so wonderfully in the Music Group can develop and grow in a faith community who loves and values them, and maybe with the help of Sophie and Kitty take over the music in years to come, leading the next generation in joyful singing and committed worship.

The APCM is an opportunity for us to look back with thanksgiving on all that has been achieved in the past year, and to renew our commitment to that which lies ahead of us. Yes, there are serious challenges, but let us pray for the strength and the grace to rise to those challenges, in the service of God and the people of the Valley Parish.