

Your rector's letter

Dear friends,

I write this letter on 1 September. In many countries that's the date when school resumes after the summer holidays. In the UK the first school day is usually a few days later. Whether school starts on 1st September, or just after, the first week of September means for many a new start. When you read my letter, September may be almost over, and you may think there's no point in talking of the beginning of a new school year at the end of this month. However, though primary and secondary schools have already started, universities may just have opened their doors to new and returning students. So, writing about new beginnings now seems just right.

But it is not just pupils and students, teachers, lecturers and academic staff who make a new start. We should all make a new, fresh start after a lovely summer. And in particular when what we do has become routine or repetitive. The danger of sticking with tradition and holding fast to the familiar is ever present and diminishes the freshness and appeal of our activities. After 8 years in Wivenhoe as your rector, it is time that I look at things with new eyes. I remember when I first walked into St Mary's what my initial impressions were. But eight years later I may have become blind to some aspects of our church and therefore need the help of newcomers or people who look with fresh eyes to tell me what needs to change to make our church, as a building and in worship, more attractive and welcoming.

We get used to seeing less mobile people struggle with their walking frame when they come to church, or Sunday Club children gather in a drafty, chilly vestry. I could go on talking about our toilets that are not wheelchair friendly, and the deficient lighting we have, and the seating that isn't comfortable and flexible. It is only when you see the need for change that you will allow and support change. New eyes see that we need level access, new toilets, a community room, a draft-free and warm vestry, new sound and lighting, and flexible seating. Some of these changes such as a new sound system have already been carried out. New lighting is in hand as we speak. Let's all look with new eyes so that we can achieve the rest of the transformation of our church.

The same can be said about our worship. After years of worshipping together we do not see the imperfections in our liturgy. It is not the set structure (which often goes back to the liturgy of the first church) that is the cause of the sclerosis in worship. It is what is going on in the heart that may result in our worship becoming less genuine. There is always the danger of becoming routine. Every church service should feel like something we've never done before. The Eucharist should be experienced as the first gathering ever of Christian people remembering and celebrating the presence of the risen Lord. Each Bible reading should fascinate and even shock us as it did with the first Christians. Each hymn should be sung fresh, with a smile on our lips or tears in our eyes as we are struck by the words and melody. And above all, each person should be welcomed as a visitor who has never been before and who is given a warm welcome. This needs a change of heart and mentality. So let

us begin now and look and act fresh and bring tradition and new ways together, embrace continuity and change at the same time.

It is deeply rooted in a Christian's heart to reach out, to be alert to the needs of others, and to act in ways that deal with the issues that occur. We are not chained or enslaved to the world, but we stand in the world, and through our presence and example we can change the world. More and more people look at how Christians will act in a time of shortage, social fragmentation, intolerance and self-centredness. The church has been urged to help with bringing the decline of social values to a halt. I believe this is not just the task of the church, but of all members of society. Nevertheless, the church can take a lead in changing the society where needed. Less than half of the population in our country sees themselves as followers of Christ and less than 5% are regular churchgoers. But the plea for the church to act as an agent for change shows how a minority in our society can be a leader by promoting justice, peace, tolerance and equality.

May God inspire and equip you to make a new start and achieve change.

Erwin