



Churches of North
Bradford on Avon
& Villages

Release for the captives.....

Exodus 12: 50-51

All the Israelites did just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron. That very day the Lord brought the Israelites out of the land of Egypt, company by company.

Dear friends

We are in a time of change, and as we move from being held captive by Covid-19 towards freedom, there is an opportunity that we must not miss, to pause, review the past and consider the way forward. In life, we can never go back, so as God led the Israelites from captivity in Egypt to the Promised Land, we need to consider what plans God has for us and his Benefice.

We are not alone in this discernment process. The Church of England is reappraising its vision, with its strapline *bolder, simpler, humbler* and our own Diocese has now produced a draft Mission and Pastoral Plan for discussion by Deaneries.

'Church' has been very different over the past year and we need to prayerfully consider what our future shaping will be like. We need to reflect on the past and what we have learned about engaging with our communities. What are the possible solutions if we struggle to find Office Holders such as Churchwardens for some of our PCCs, and going forward, who are we as a church community, what do we see as our key priorities, what is our vision as a benefice?

As restrictions ease during the summer, there will be opportunities for us to meet, perhaps in small groups, to share our experiences over the past year, to consider what we have learned from it and how that might influence our future. We need to ask ourselves what we need to let go of in order to serve our communities better, and what do we want to develop, if we want people to come to faith or grow in faith.

We are members of *Thrive*, a community of different benefices in the diocese coming together to learn from one another and to help our churches thrive. Whilst discerning how we can thrive, our *Thrive* members are planning a range of summer celebration opportunities for us as church members to re-engage, and get to know one another again, within and across church boundaries. They are also considering how we re-engage with people in our communities beyond the church.

Some of the social ideas considered are:

- A benefice picnic open to all
- A series of short or long walks so between us we 'beat the bounds' of our benefice
- Cream teas

- Pimms in the garden
- Small groups following the *Hidden Doors* trail in Bradford on Avon

How do we include *everyone* in the discussion?

We can use the social events as a springboard for discussion groups. But we need to create ways for all of us to have the opportunity, if they so wish, to discuss these issues, perhaps in small groups as they walk, or over tea and cake in someone's garden, or on Zoom, and feed their thoughts back in to their PCCs, so that between us we can discern our vision. If wished, we can set up theme-based conversation groups so people can talk with others on a topic close to their hearts.

It will also be important to draw in views from our communities outside the church to discern if, for example, they have watched an online service or if they have visited our churches and if so, what did they value. Their views will be invaluable in shaping our future priorities.

Summer services

These discussions would be aided by a range of sermons during the summer encouraging us to discern, to reflect, to be creative in our solutions. They would culminate in a gathered autumn Harvest celebration which might coincide with '*Back to church Sunday*'.

Opportunities for reflection

In short, we will be giving ourselves the opportunity to reflect on the following:

1. What has the past year been like for you and your family and friends
2. As we had to move to online services, and use our churches and churchyards differently, what did we learn from this
3. What impact has Lockdown had on our personal faith, our worship, our mission
4. How have our personal priorities changed, and what might the priorities of the church be in the future
5. If we look forward 5 or 10 years, what would we want our benefice to look like, and what would we have to do to make our vision a reality.

These are **your** churches. This is **your** benefice. Rectors come and go, and I will be retiring in two years' time. Part of a Rector's role is to lead and help shape a church community for that stage of its journey. Your vision can shape the vision for our benefice now, and in the future.

Please pray about this, and if you have further ideas on how we can create opportunities for discussion, please let me, Tessa, Rachel or your church *Thrive* representatives know. Details of the *Thrive* members are in NewsLink.

God bless you all
Ann, Rector