Vicar’s Letter for April 2016

Dear Friends

March 13th was this year’s Annual Parochial Church Meeting (APCM), held after our church service and followed by a delicious bring and share lunch. So, as in previous years, I share with you my annual report which was presented at that meeting. For those not present I hope it gives an overview, and for those who have already heard it, a chance to ponder over some of the issues:

As ever our APCM gives us the wonderful opportunity for a mixture of looking in two directions – to the past as we give thanks and make sense of the last year, and to the future as we consider the difference that through God we are all called to make. Whether backwards or forwards, we must never lose sight of a great number of individuals who have played their part in making St Matthew’s what it is. And I think it is right to start with thanksgiving for those who have died over the past 12 months – Phyllis Hines, Gwen Pennington, Ernest Horner, Thora Lomax. How much they gave to St Matthew’s in their loyalty, faithfulness and generosity over the years. Their memories live on through us and the life of St Matthew’s.

Thanks also to Bob and Bobbie, who are very much alive, I’m glad to say!, for the past year of support as our Churchwardens.

Thanks to our PCC members, especially to Gilbert and Pauline whose term of office ends, and to Nick who is having to step down owing to his working schedule. Thanks to Tom whose term of office also ends, but who as Treasurer will still continue on PCC ex-officio. We welcome and thank those who are newly elected and who are willing to serve our church in this way. And to Simon, for his support, friendship and being such a good colleague.

And as always, there are far too many people to thank individually for everything they have done for St Matthew’s over the past year. Each one of us has received specific talents from God in order to fulfil ministry in all its forms, and I am very grateful for the way everyone works together with love and sensitivity to contribute to the needs of the Parish in whatever way they feel able. Your support and commitment is invaluable. The other reports given at the APCM have identified so much of the work and energy that has gone into the running of St Matthew’s over the year. These reports always reveal the breadth and variety of the life of St Matthew’s.

So how can we sum up the past year?

Firstly St Matthew’s is a worshipping church – this is the first reason of who we are as Christians: we are a worshipping people and what we engage with on a Sunday morning sets the scene for our daily lives throughout the week. We know worship is important, and I believe anyone coming to our church will also know its importance when they see the numbers of people actively engaged in leading worship in so many forms: our organist, choir, servers, lay assistants, readers, intercessors, those who teach in J-club and those who clean and decorate the church with displays and flowers, and when they experience our attentiveness and participation.

Because worship is at the heart of all we do and are it is important to look at our worship from time to time and ask whether it not only meets our needs but also whether there are others’ needs we should be meeting. How can our worship be the best it can be, and does our worship enable a real encounter with the living God? It was to try to look at some of these questions that the Questionnaire about worship on our 3rd Sundays was created: Worship must suit us, yes, but also we must give due consideration to the many who are outside our midst whom we long to attract and for whom God longs they come to know. How can our worship attract them?

Many of you will be aware that St Matthew’s School recently had its Statutory Inspection for Anglican and Methodist Schools (SIAMS), for which it was granted the highest level of achievement: Outstanding. This Inspection looks at how the Christian values are not only taught but explicitly lived out in the day to day life of the School. It is important for us to realise that worship happens in our Church of England school each school day, through collective worship, through the Monday morning Affirmation and Reflection, through the areas set aside in each classroom for prayer and reflection and through the prayers each class has written.

Worship is what we do here at St Matthew’s on Sunday but worship spreads throughout our community through our own personal times of prayer at home and at work and through the prayers of others, such as our School community.

Secondly St Matthew’s is a welcoming church. We have this year welcomed not hundreds, but thousands of people into our church – school groups through school visits, workshops and services; through our Christmas services, not least our Christingle and Carol services; through families and friends attending funerals (21) , baptisms (21) and weddings (4) and more recently the Guides’ Thinking Day service (100 or so).

We are all stewards of a marvellous and inspirational building, but it is nothing without the people. Sunday morning is of course special but it is just the tip of the Christian iceberg in terms of activity and impact on the wider community. We live out our welcome through all we do, whether that is serving tea and coffee or manning a stall at the Garden party, to the invaluable job of our sidespersons in welcoming all who come with a smile.

Thirdly St Matthew’s is a learning church. It is a great joy to me that our Bible studies and Study courses have been so popular, with so many attending again and again. This year’s ecumenical Lent group has over 30 participants. I am always interested and humbled by those who willingly share of themselves by being interviewed during Lent. All these are ways to indicate that learning about God, learning about each other is vital to a living Church, a living people of God. As new people come to join us how good it is to speak to them, get to know them and their journeys as part of the family here at St Matthew’s.

Learning is also highlighted by our Authorised Lay Ministers (ALM’s), with Syd joining Dave and Anne in this ministry of pastoral care. Kim is soon to finish her studies with Foundations for Ministry and we prayerfully seek the way forward to how she will use her learning for further study and ministry, and we support and rejoice with Anne as she embarks on her study as a Reader this autumn

And fourthly St Matthew’s is a generous church: Thank you for your generosity. So often generosity is linked to money (and I will be coming on to that!) but it’s important to look at generosity in its widest expression: Generosity in sharing worship with others, especially the deaf church; generosity in giving time and talents for meetings, practical work in and around the church building; generosity in visiting and praying for each other; generosity in filling in gaps in rotas and volunteering to do a myriad number of things that are required to keep a Church open and up and running – so much of which is hidden and unnoticed.

And of course your generosity in giving financially. Thank you for being part of the generous agreement that part of the legacy should go towards a children’s and youth worker. I’m pleased to announce that the advert for this job will go out in April and we look to appoint in June with a start date in the autumn. Thank you, because I firmly believe that any investment we make in our young people of Stretford will not be wasted, but can only go to changing lives and raising aspirations in our community.

However, as Tom has already pointed out, our giving does need looking at, so that it is realistic giving and we can cover our costs without constantly having to dip in to our savings pot. Our parish share this year is £36,000 and that does not include electricity and gas, water, insurance etc, all of which needs to be paid as well. Gilbert made an excellent suggestion at our last PCC meeting, **that if everyone were to increase their giving by 10% we would cover our losses.** So please may I ask you seriously and prayerfully to consider that suggestion and act upon it.

To end: as we look back on another good year at St Matthew’s and as we look forward with joy and expectation on God’s blessings for the next year let us each ask ourselves:

What positive experience can I share with someone outside the Church of my time here at St Matthew’s?  
What is important to me in our worship?  
What do I intend to do for the first time in the coming year at St Matthew’s?  
What do I find challenging/life-giving in my life as a follower of Christ?  
What one extra generous act can I do for those with whom I share membership of this church family?

In the words of our post communion prayer today:

Lord Jesus Christ,

you have taught us

that what we do for the least of our brothers and sisters

we do also for you:

give us the will to be the servant of others

and you were the servant of all,

and gave up your life and died for us,

but are alive and reign, now and for ever. Amen.

With every blessing

Kate

**Christian Aid Week – 15th – 21st May 2016**

Christian Aid 2016 focuses on families in Bangladesh whose lives have been destroyed by flooding. We consider women like Morsheda, a young mother of four, living in Bangladesh. She has no land, few assets and no savings.

For Morsheda’s family living on low-lying islands in the Brahmaputra River, floods are a terrifying part of everyday life. Morsheda can’t even count on having a safe place to call home: the single-room, corrugated-iron house she shares with her children has been flooded four times.

Morsheda and her children live a precarious life. They know that the floods will come again, and soon. But we can lift our neighbours like Morsheda to safety.

Just £250 is enough for a Christian Aid Home Safety Package. It could flood-proof Morsheda’s home, raising it eight foot on an earth plinth, so that she has a safe place to rebuild, keep livestock and grow crops. It could also buy a goat, seeds and a wormery to help produce compost – all of which will give her a long-term income and a solid foundation for a new life.

What we can do:

This year at St Mathew’s we have taken the decision not to do door to door collecting. This decision has not been made lightly, but it is due to the drop in number of people able to deliver the envelopes and collect them. Also collectors are finding it increasingly difficult to find people at home when trying to collect the envelopes.

So this year we are asking you all to think of ways you might be able to raise money for Christian Aid. Here are some ideas:

* Ask you family, friends and neighbours for donations
* Arrange a collection at work
* Hold a raffle or a coffee morning
* Invite some friends round for a meal or drinks, to watch a film or enjoy a quiz night together and ask for a donation
* Do a sponsored event and raise money that way.

We hope that if everyone does something – however small – we can still give to the work of Christian Aid. More information will be given out nearer the time and in the May magazine, but this is just to help you get started! How many Home Safety Packages will we provide from St Matthew’s?