

All Saints Alive

VICAR'S VIEWPOINT

Fourteen Happy Years

Dear Friends,

It has been a great privilege for my wife and I to have served in Hertford for fourteen happy years. For 42 years I have had a varied ministry in several wonderful places.

First I served as Curate of Wordsley in Staffordshire where Stewart Chrystal is made. Then I was Curate of Hednesford, a coal mining town on the edge of Cannock Chase, looking after two daughter churches. From 1971-76 I was Vicar of Hanbury, a lovely church in rural Staffordshire, which witnessed the biggest explosion in Britain when they blew the top of a gypsum mine being used to store bombs during the war.

We then had sixteen years at Berrow and Brean on the Somerset coast. This was caravan land and like all seaside towns rather earned its nickname of costa geriatrica. I applied for the Lord Chancellor's living of Bridgwater and had an interview in 10 Downing Street, but to my surprise was offered the post of Vicar of All Saints, Hertford, instead. We worship a God of surprises.



Hanbury Church



My years at All Saints have seen my children developing their careers and marrying. I now have five lovely grandchildren. All these parishes have been extremely different from each other, and we will now be moving to Nutley, a pleasant village in the heart of the Ashdown Forest in Sussex. We have bought a nice detached house with a quarter of an acre garden, but we will have to throw out a lot of furniture and clutter since it is considerably smaller than All Saints Vicarage.

I am sure it is sensible to leave whilst I am still winning. Wisely the Church of England has decided that all Bishops and Vicars must retire at 70, though one may be a Curate for ever. This means one can take services and do pastoral work, but only under the instructions of the Vicar, or if there is a vacancy the Churchwardens. I hope that I will be able to plenty of work in rural Sussex. I would like to have time to write too. I have written the first draft of a biography of my great, great grandfather, John Thomas, a pioneer missionary in India.

The evidence is that once a clergyman has turned 60 the number of younger people in his church steadily declines. The older he is, the more this trend is present. I am now 67, and feel All Saints needs a younger vicar who will make some changes and bring in new ideas. If every thing stays the same, then there will be no growth.

**Berrow Church**

The post of Vicar of All Saints will be advertised in the church press, interviews will be held, and the person chosen as the new incumbent must give three months notice to his or her previous post. A short vacancy is good as it gives the parish an opportunity to prepare for a new vicar, but recently many vacancies have been far too long, a year being common. At Hanbury and Berrow I met my predecessor before he left. This seems a far better way of doing things than the present system.

I have never taken part in a competitive interview for a post, but there is no doubt that this system does produce good vicars. Witness the quality of the clergy recently appointed to Bengeo, Hertford Heath and St Andrew's.

There has been talk of a possible Team Ministry in Hertford. Bob Russell in his recent book gives the following statistic. Congregations declined by 8% between 1980 and 2,000 nationally, but in Team Ministries they declined by 16%. People like to know who their Vicar is. If clergy in other parishes want help I have always found them very willing to give it to each other.

A God We Can Trust

The future may seem uncertain, but we are called to be courageous. As a clergyman I have had to help people going through terrible tragedies, but one knows that one can have absolute trust in God.

At the end of the first century AD Presbyter John was banished to the island of Patmos. He knew that the young church was fragile and that

believers would either confess their faith and risk their lives for it, or slip quietly into the grey fog of no belief. He wrote the Book of Revelation to encourage them. Those Christians must have stood firm, for the book survives, but it cannot have been easy.

"After this I looked", he wrote "and there was a great multitude that no one could number, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands." It is the language of worship. Unfortunately too many have poured over Revelation with an ulterior motive, knowing the question and the answer, and twisting the words of the book to find the proof.

In every parish I have worked in there have been saints, ordinary Christians often under extraordinary pressure, who have shown in their daily lives the love of Jesus. They have looked forward to the promise of heaven, the river, the trees, seeing again those they have loved and lost. Revelation is a strange book with lurid imagery, stark pictures, and talk of thousands of years, horsemen, dragons, and the lamb in the midst. Fantastic yes, but real, for the saints are real.

Your friend in Christ,

Bill Kemm

**Brean Church**