

**St Mark's, Armagh**  
**Annual General Vestry Report**  
**Tuesday, 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020**

**SCRIPTURE READING : Matthew 25v14-30**

The Parable of the 'Bags of Gold' is a passage which has struck me a new way during recent months. God has given us the treasure of the Gospel, and in a very changing context of late we have been challenged as to how it is that we can be messengers of the Good News of Jesus Christ. Some churches have lots of resources. Others have little available to them. But what has encouraged me is how congregations, irrespective of size, have grasped opportunities to minister and share in the name of Jesus in whatever way that they could have.

When the master in Jesus' story returned, it was the lazy servant who did nothing with what he had been given who was condemned. It didn't matter how much money the servants was given. What mattered was what they did with what they had.

I pray that this report will reflect a Parish that has done something of what it could, for the glory of God, amidst a very changing context.

This report will reflect upon our Parish life since the last General Vestry Meeting, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2019.

After all of the services associated with Holy Week, including the 3 Hours Service led by Archdeacon Terry Scott, Easter Sunday began at the Diocesan Dawn Service for many of our parishioners. Afterwards, the Youth Fellowship hosted a breakfast here in the Venue which was to helped us greatly with subsidising the costs of quite a large group attending Summer Madness in July.

After Easter, we had the tremendous privilege of having Miss Sarah Crawford serve amongst us as a placement student from the Church of Ireland Theological Institute. Sarah's presence amongst us was inspiring. Her faith was evident in our words and actions and our congregation really connected with her. Still I am asked still how she is doing. Sarah will commence her Deacon Intern in Derryvolgie Parish Lisburn on Sunday, her ordination shall take place on 13<sup>th</sup> September and her wedding is planned for January of next year.

On Sunday, we too shall receive the arrival of a Deacon Intern. We are very much looking forward to Matthew and Erin Topley joining us, prior to Matthew's Ordination here in St Mark's on Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> September. It is just fabulous to see ordinands with a heart for the Lord Jesus, as demonstrated by students like Sarah, Matthew, and Rodney Blair (who shall also be ordained here next week), entering into the ordained ministry of the Church. The role of Rectors and parishes who receive Deacon Interns is to prepare Deacons for curacies to which they shall be appointed next year. May we pray for those who are to be ordained and do our very best to encourage Matthew and Erin as they service amongst us in this formative year.

Last May we had a lot of fun with our Church Fete and were blessed as we met to pray in church daily from Pentecost Sunday to Ascension Day as part of the 'Thy Kingdom Come' prayer movement. This year we participated in 'Thy Kingdom Come' by Zoom.

A very significant occasion in May of last year was the commissioning of Mr Paul Turton as a Diocesan Reader. Previous to 26<sup>th</sup> May, Paul was a Parish Reader and has, since his commissioning been out and about in Parishes, leading and preaching in vacant parishes and taking part at the invitation of Rectors. It is a very positive step that a member of our Parish is serving in this very important ministry of service in the Church.

June began with the highlights of the Sunday School BBQ and Children's Day Service. Weather postponed the picnic until August, which had then to be relocated to the Church Hall, again due to rain!

Our former curate, Rev'd Pete Smith was instituted Rector of Loughgall and Grange on 7<sup>th</sup> June last year. Pete was an appreciated member of our Parish Staff Team. His passionate faith inspired us all. Pete's desire to reach the lost challenged me and I believe us all in the right way. It was a privilege for us to help prepare him for ministry as a Rector in our neighbouring Parishes. He very much departed St Mark's with our prayers and best wishes.

Just a few days later, it was a delight to attend the Service of Adult Confirmation on Pentecost Sunday in St Patrick's Cathedral where Mrs Gillian Ruddy and Mrs Tracey Liggett were confirmed. Both are regular worshippers in St Mark's and it was a very joyful occasion.

A week following, Trinity Sunday June 16<sup>th</sup>, St Mark's was the venue for the very moving Dedication Service for Co. Armagh Memorial Wall. With the Presbyterian Moderator, a representative for the Methodist Church, Archbishop Clarke and Bishop Robin Eames present, it was a service with much emotion and poignancy. The church was almost filled to capacity and it was very moving to speak to relatives of those whose names the wall bears following the service. The wall is a credit to the Co Armagh Phoenix Group who worked incredibly hard to raise the necessary funds for this lasting memorial for Police Officers, Army Personnel and Prison Officers, who were murdered by terrorists, whether from Co. Armagh, or in Armagh since formation of Northern Ireland.

On June 18<sup>th</sup>, we reclaimed the 'Ulster Gazette Cup' from our cricketing friends of the Mall Presbyterian Church. Again, this proved to be a light hearted and enjoyable evening. It is such a shame that this year's match has not been played. Hopefully, next year!

Summer Madness took place at the end of June, and beginning of July 2019 and as always it was a fantastic event with excellent speakers, seminars and activities on offer! The participants seemed to have a great time and were blessed by the talks, worship and

activities offered to them. In total we had 23 under 18 campers, 16 of which were from our parish, and the remainder being from other churches or no church.

GLOW (Youth Club) continues to flourish and thanks must be extended to Lorraine Thornbury and her team for the energy and enthusiasm that they put into this group. GLOW are hosting a day away to Portrush on Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> Sept. Youth Fellowship also met twice monthly during the year past and during Covid Lockdown via Zoom. Numbers are small. Youth Fellowship will be something to look at again during the weeks and months ahead with the input from our new team members.

Again, on the theme of youth ministry it was a genuine delight that 7 young people from our Parish took part in a Diocesan Trip to Romania with Habitat for Humanity. It was a real encouragement for us as a Parish that so many took part and I know from their reports back, including during a special service which they led in September, that it was a trip that was much enjoyed and a time of great blessing.

Also during the summer months, the Crozier Hall was filled with life again due to the Holiday Bible Club running from August 12<sup>th</sup>. With the pirate inspired theme of 'Landlubbers' it was well supported and a lot of fun. Each year, we can be truly grateful to Hannah McCann and all of our Holiday Bible Club volunteers. This year our Holiday Bible Club ran online using material created by Mrs Jill Hamilton and her team in Connor Diocese. With the expressed permission of the Bishop elect, who shall be consecrated tomorrow evening (3<sup>rd</sup> September), we used Connor Diocese's material and included some local touches to offer Holiday Bible Club at home, which we trust was of faith encouragement to children who took part. I even heard of some older members of our congregation tuning in!

September began with hosting a service on behalf of our Diocesan Youth and Children's Ministry Board for Teachers and Schools Support Staff. As in the previous year, this was a small scale but very special service to encourage those involved in our education system.

Also, at the start of last September we advertised for a Curate Assistant. I am truly grateful to the Select Vestry for their desire to appoint a curate. The harmony, good will and support of our Select Vestry is something that I do not take for granted and thank God for regularly. Having been through the disappointment of not being able to appoint through from the Theological College in June, it was an evidential answer to prayer to be able to offer Rev'd Geoff Hamilton the post of Curate Assistant of our Parish as an outcome of the advertisement process. Since his arrival in January, Geoff has brought energy, ideas, and a distinctly pastoral touch to the collective ministry of our church. He is incredibly easy to work with and is known by all for his sense of humour. His level of forward planning is keeping me on my toes! Truly, Geoff and his wife, Jill, are a blessing to us, and are to thank God for.

Our Parish BBQ took place on 13<sup>th</sup> September, later in the year due to a very busy June. The later date didn't seem to impact on attendance and a pleasant evening was enjoyed by all present.

Our sixth Alpha Course began on September 17<sup>th</sup>. Whilst a little smaller in attendance than usual, it was no less significant. I passionately believe in the importance of having a course available to help launch Christian faith into a sense of growing discipleship which is offered by such features as the established Bible Fellowship, House Group and Lent Course which we run each year. Since lockdown, Geoff has led House Group online, which he will continue to do during this term.

During our traditional 3<sup>rd</sup> weekend in October our Harvest Thanksgiving Services took place which included the now established Ladies' Breakfast on the Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> October. The services were well attended and it was a very joyful weekend of praise and thanksgiving. Whether at harvest or at any other time of year, our thanks must always be extended to our Choir, Choir Leaders, Mrs Gillian Reaney and Mrs Janice Nicholl and to other members of our Organ Rota for their willing assistance in encouraging the sung worship of Almighty God Sunday by Sunday. Whilst the Choir is currently suspended due to Covid, when it returns there is always the warm invitation for more to join what is a very happy and friendly group of people who enjoy singing especially when it is for the Glory of God.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> November we hosted the Diocesan Synod due to repairs at the Diocesan Synod Hall. It was here in our Church Hall that Archbishop Clarke announced his retirement to take effect on 2nd February. I for one was greatly saddened by Archbishop Clarke's departure from our Diocesan family. He was a marvellous Archbishop, full of faith and interest in the well being of the parishes under his oversight. It was always a delight to have him with us at services such as Maundy Thursday, Christmas Eve, Confirmations and other special occasions. From my last communication with him, I am glad to say that despite the restrictions, he is enjoying retirement in Co. Cork.

Also during November of last year, Ms Karen Braithwaite led three sessions of the Christians Against Poverty Money Course here in our church hall. This is a simple, practical course deigned to help anyone to budget more effectively and manage their finances in a manner to avoid debt. I am truly grateful to Karen for undertaking the necessary training and offering this opportunity to people from our parish and community. Participant feedback was excellent and Karen can be very encouraged by her first venture with this project. This course can run again as an when it is appropriate to do so.

On Remembrance Day it was our turn to host those on parade for our Remembrance Service. It is always an honour to have our church filled almost to capacity as we remember the sacrifice of so many in the cause of service and freedom, with thanksgiving.

Also during November, a group of parish representatives took some time to consider a parish logo and statement to encapsulate what it is who we are and what we are called to do. The little logo of the tower and trees was hence developed; a recognisable image of

our church and the strapline 'Serving together for Christ's Kingdom' which I believe is a very fitting description of how we might consider why it is that we exist as a church community.

The now annual Kildare Shopping Trip took place on November 23<sup>rd</sup> and I would like to offer sincere thanks to Mrs Florence Magwood for organising what I know is a much appreciated opportunity to undertake some Christmas Shopping. I don't think it will be practically possible this year, but who knows, another idea might develop instead. Just shortly following on 5<sup>th</sup> December, the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday Club went on a trip to Ballyclare Garden Centre. It is lovely that the 1<sup>st</sup> Thursday Club continues to be a very popular group for senior ladies from our Parish, as well as some friends. Those who lead it, as well as all of our Parish Organisations are to be appreciated and thanked. Trying not to leave anyone out, may I express appreciation to all involved in Sunday School and Creche, Youth Fellowship, GLOW, Mothers' Union, Parish Choir and Junior Choir, Bible Fellowship, 1st Thursday Club, Bowling Club, Marks Men, Wheels and Squeals, the Prayer Ministry Partnership, CD Distribution, Church Collection Counting Teams, Cleaning Teams, Prayers and Readers Team and anything else that I might have forgotten, thank you one and all.

On Sunday, November 24<sup>th</sup> the annual Service of Light and Remembrance was held in St Mark's, during which the families of 17 people whose funerals were led by Parish Clergy during the year past, were especially remembered in prayer. On Advent Sunday we hosted the annual Association of Mission Societies Advent Carol Service during our evening service and it was lovely to hear more of the work of Mission Agencies which we are associated with to varying degrees.

In the approach to Christmas, The Armstrong Primary School held their School Carol Service in St Mark's on the last day of term. The youth fellowship contributed to our community carol singing with a visit to the Apple Mews residential facility for people with disabilities. This was much appreciated by the staff and residents, and I think it is very beneficial for the teenagers who came along. Our carol singers sang for local residents on their doorsteps, before concluding our excursions with a Carol Service in Sunnymead Residential Home. Our 9 Lessons and carols Service took place on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> December again prompting some incredibly favourable comments by those who attended. The Sunday School Nativity Service took place on the same day, and as always the Children's Singing was superb. We continue to record our thanks to Mrs Clare Speers for not only assisting with their preparation for the Nativity Service, but also for her leading the Junior Choir throughout the year. Approaching the end of 2019, on December 29<sup>th</sup>, as a parish we dedicated ourselves to the Lord's Service during a Covenant Service at 10.30am.

Having missed it during the past two years, it was so pleased to be able to attend the Royal School Armagh's SU 'Celebrate' Service in St Mark's on 12<sup>th</sup> January.

On the following Saturday, our church was the venue for an annual 'Day of Prayer'. As I was preparing this report earlier today, I was thinking how amidst all of the stands and prayer pointers that we had that day, there was nothing in place to help us to pray about a

virus we were hearing a little about in China. In January, or indeed in February, we had no idea what was coming did we?

Geoff joined us on January 26<sup>th</sup> and we had great plans to build upon for the months ahead.

The Marriage Preparation course ran as normal during February. Ash Wednesday commenced Lent on 26<sup>th</sup> February and an excellent Lent Series considering Faith and Mental Health began which stimulated more interest than any Lent Course we ever ran before.

But the storm was brewing.

On March 12<sup>th</sup> a wedding took place in St Mark's, with the news that as of the next day guest lists at hotels in the Republic would be restricted.

By this stage, participants in Holy Communion services were allowed to receive bread alone, with only the celebrant drinking from the chalice. We were not allowed to shake hands at the church door. Instead we used our elbows or first bumps!

Two babies were baptised in St Mark's on Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March and the evening service took place. At both services some of our most regular parishioners were absent. There was an atmosphere of anxiety and after the evening service Geoff and I knew that next week, many from our congregation would start to stay at home. We didn't realise that not only those who were fearful would be absent from St Mark's, but we all would be.

On St Patrick's Day, church leaders of the Church of Ireland, Methodist and Presbyterian churches suspended acts of public worship in church buildings and suspended all parish organisations with immediate effect.

Weddings were rearranged. Funerals were restricted to ten people, at a graveside for a service lasting at most 15 minutes.

Every aspect of Parish and everyday life was changed dramatically.

On Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> March, a few of us gathered in church to record a Mothering Sunday Service for sharing on our Parish YouTube channel the next day. During that service, I think I spoke of a time in the near future when we would be together as a church family and we would be able to greet each other with a handshake or a hug. How naïve I was!!

Following the Prime Minister's speech to the nation on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, the UK Lockdown began on March 26<sup>th</sup>. With the message being very much 'Stay at home', our online services began to happen from homes of clergy and parishioners. I could never have imagined doing some of the things that we did. Mothering Sunday, Palm Sunday, Holy Week and Easter were all observed from our homes. Holy Communion was celebrated online from

the Rectory Dining Room and Garden. On one occasion, Geoff preached from his Green House in Lurgan. When we look back, worship under lockdown was so different to how we would have ordinarily ministered. However, what we offered was appreciated by people from our parish, community, province and world. We received messages of encouragement and thanks from all sorts of places.

Up until the summer, our weekly online pattern included a Sunday Morning Service, Monday Morning Devotion, Wednesday lunchtime Prayers and Friday evening reflection. During the summer, our weekly service was accompanied by a 'Wednesday Wandering', a devotional service focusing upon the experiences of an Old Testament character. Without having Geoff's willing help, we could never have sustained so much online worship and teaching. Whilst I am sure that it much have been frustrating for Geoff not to be able to get out and about in his new parish, I am so glad to have had his help over the past few months. By telephone, letter and occasional 'door step' visits, we endeavoured to offer whatever pastoral cover we have been capable of within guidelines.

I cannot stress the depth of my appreciation to Clare and Mark Speers, and Adam and Gillian Reaney, for their willing recording of hymns for our services. They have been simply brilliant and I praise God for their musical gifts and willingness to offer them in service and in faith. I also want to offer a public and very sincere thank you to Keith Ruddy for all of his help with uploading to YouTube and putting together service videos whilst we were on holiday during August. It is wonderful to have willing volunteers to help with our services.

On 8<sup>th</sup> May, the 75 anniversary of VE Day was quietly observed by our nation. Restrictions eased enough for me to feel comfortable with recording a service in church for sharing at home. Technically, services could have been recorded in St Mark's during 'lockdown', but I felt recording from home reinforced the plea from our government to stay at home if at all possible. Since then, at least parts of services have been recorded in St Mark's.

Probably the most memorable service for me since Easter was our Children's Day Service. With children singing along and dancing to a special song, as well as reading the lesson and praying over our community in an interactive video, topped off by an excellent talk by Jill Hamilton, it was very special and a joy to be part of and to share for the glory of God to all who tuned in.

A fun feature of lockdown was the Zoom based quizzes that we offered, just as a chance to get together, even though we were in our own homes. As well as House Groups, some parish meetings, including Select Vestry met via Zoom.

With the easing of restrictions, St Mark's reopened for morning worship on Sunday, July 5<sup>th</sup>.

I think we were all anxious about reopening. There was a lot of paper work completed. Stewards were trained. And our Sexton, David Mansbridge, rose to the challenges

presented to him personally with a desire to do whatever it takes to enable services of worship in our church again.

I was keen to open as soon as the opportunity was presented to us. The infection rate in early summer was as low as it could be. There was no safer time to open our doors and personally, I was really looking forward to being together, as a church family, to worship our Lord again in person.

I know that for many of our congregation, the confidence of being in a public setting is something that they are worried about and I very much understand a fear of being amongst other people again. Therefore, we are committed to continuing online worship and are very happy to be able to say that Live Streaming of services shall commence on Sunday morning. This I hope will enable parishioners at home to worship alongside those in church and to feel more connected to their brothers and sisters in Christ of our church family. I would like to thank the Select Vestry for permission to purchase a laptop to accompany the video camera recently bought, as well as the necessary equipment to allow the Church Office's Wifi to be available in the Church and the Crozier Hall.

So, as well as offering live streamed Sunday morning services, what next?

Well, all I can say is that Covid has a habit of changing plans!!

But here is the plan so far ....

This Sunday weekly evening worship shall commence in the church hall at 7pm.

On Wednesday evenings, a service shall take place in church at 7.30pm. The sermon from the mid week service shall be used in an online Friday Reflection at 9pm. This term we are offering a series based upon the Parables of Jesus.

Sunday School can begin online using a resource produced by the Diocese of Connor. Our thanks again to Jill Hamilton for helping us utilise this resource. As the autumn progresses, we shall review Sunday School in consultation with Teachers and Leaders.

Youth Fellowship, House Group and Alpha will all meet online this term.

As for other organisations, I have yet to discuss with the relevant leaders. But essentially no plans are in place for organisations to meet in person, with the exception to the Ladies Walking Group.

Since the church has reopened three children have been baptised, two couples have been married and two funerals have taken place in our church building.

We are taking baby steps and we are seeking to do so with wisdom and in faith.

As always, the Select Vestry have been a pleasure to work with and I would like to thank each of them individually and commend the Glebe Wardens for the diligence they offer to the maintenance and enhancement of our Church properties.

As well as the ongoing monitoring of finances, projects completed since the last General Vestry Meeting include :-

Concreting to the side and rear of the Rectory

Repairs to the Crozier Hall Roof

Purchase of tables for the Crozier Hall

Installation of new lighting in the main Hall

Installation of CCTV in the church porch and outside of Crozier Hall and Office

Implementation of the recommendations of a Tree Survey Report

The next project is the resurfacing of the church avenue from the front door to the Mall.

Income this year has significantly suffered. To help in some way, a sponsored relay fundraiser entitled 'Le Mall 24' shall take place this weekend.

The team that I have to work with here in St Mark's truly is a gift. I have already spoken about Geoff and David and now it is Caroline's turn.

I continue to express how we cannot overestimate what she does. During 'Lockdown' she worked diligently from her home, undertaking all of her usual duties and more. There have been extra issues of Pinnacles in recent months, under Caroline's initiative and beyond her paid hours, out of her heart to help keep our parishioners better connected and informed. Caroline offers our Parish much dedication and as I have said before, her confidence of sensitive information is worthy of commendation. Caroline's interest for the well being of the parish has prompted her come up with various ideas and they usually begin with the following words; 'Here's a thought ...'. So, in honour of what has become a bit of a tradition, I would like to express my gratitude to Caroline 'here's a thought' Nesbitt.

As always, I would like to conclude my thoughts by thanking my family. Matthew has been such a help to me with getting to grips how to make videos for publication online. He has spent a lot of time working on getting everything in order for livestreaming. Isaac also has been helping with videos in church. They will be key members of the AV Team that we need to build up with additional personnel. And Claire continues to work away behind the scenes by supporting me in ways I cannot thank her enough for. Up until lockdown she continued to lead the Creche each Sunday to help the children settle better with a constant face that they know amidst the rota of much appreciated helpers. I owe Claire and my family so much and I thank them dearly.

But above all, we thank our Lord Jesus, who makes everything possible and gives us all the collective calling to love and to serve. May everything we do be for his glory. Amen.