

## **Address by Nigel Guthrie at St David's Church, Exeter, for Sunday 4 July 2021**

As we begin July some of us are starting to look forward to summer holidays – or 'staycations' as they are being called this year. So for us it's out with Alsace and Annecy and in with north Wales and Norfolk! But we will be grateful to get away at all given the continued uncertainties.

I wonder what your approach is to packing for holidays? For many years with two boys going self-catering to the coast in France or Spain we really went large; estate car with top box, body boards, inflatable boat, a box of kitchen bits an empty wine box just in case we found a supermarket that sold it, chargers for electronic devices... and even a few clothes and shoes. But that has all changed and when Tina and I potter off on our own now we take a lot less stuff - and it is rather liberating!

Jesus was definitely in the light packing category. He ordered his disciples to take nothing for their travels except a walking stick; no bread, no bag, no money and just to wear sandals and a tunic.

Perhaps it was a sign to the later Church that we should also travel light? If it was we haven't done terribly well; with our magnificent buildings, byzantine hierarchies, church commissioners to manage the historic money and all manner of councils and synods. What could possibly go wrong? But then it's not that easy to live simply as a church. Usually when new churches start off in schools or other shared buildings they quickly become frustrated that they don't have space to use when they want to run activities. And when they start off in simple ways without structures of accountability they quite easily get hijacked by charismatic but unaccountable leaders or taken over by an unelected cabal of elders who decide the direction of the church. So, I can confidently say after more than 30 years of ordained ministry that the Anglican Church is the least worst option! And perhaps that is not a bad way of looking at it. Because the church is not meant to be an end in itself. But it should be a vessel in which we can traverse the seas of life in the company of those who share our faith, and in which we can nurture hope for a world which full of peace, justice and love and where forgiveness and mutual respect are evident everywhere – health warning – we have some way to go!

The Church of England has recently adopted the strapline – simpler, humbler, bolder and whatever we may think of straplines in general, or this one in particular, there's no doubt that it does resonate with today's readings. Jesus allowed no extra baggage

when his disciples went out on their mission to call for repentance and bring healing. Their equipment was simple but their mission was bold.

In our epistle St Paul expresses how he copes with his 'thorn in the flesh'; that unknown affliction which stopped him from being too elated. God gave him these words 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness'.

Like St Paul the Church in the Western world is feeling its weakness. And the Church of England is certainly at a turning point where the trappings of Victorian religion are falling away and large changes brought about by the secularization of society over many decades are increasingly making themselves felt. And some of this is very good, when we are turning away from a culture of entitlement, from imperialistic attitudes in our faith and from condoning discrimination. But as Jonathan Draper said last week, there is a long way to go. Archdeacon Andrew Beane will be visiting our parish in October for a consultation about ministry in the city and we need to sharpen our thinking about what we are here for and how we can work with others. This is why we've been having discussion group looking at a book by Sam Wells 'A future that's bigger than the past'. It's a way of focussing our thoughts on how God may want to use our church in the coming years. We've made a good start but you would still be very welcome to join the group if you would be interested. Please contact Belinda if you would like to join.

We know that the church is struggling in many places to connect with its local communities. But we also know that many people long to feel a greater sense of connectedness and community – and this need has been sharpened by the pandemic. It is not that churches haven't been offering these things it's just that they aren't connecting as they did when the Christian faith was taught in all schools and practised by many families. One of our tasks is to make stronger connections.

Then there is also a widespread recognition that the Church of England (and many other churches) face a great challenge of resources. And this is where a major spiritual challenge lies too, because if we believe, with St Paul, that God's grace is sufficient then we shouldn't be too concerned that we are going to run out of resource as God's grace can never be exhausted! And looking around we do have many resources, buildings, structures, connections, money, faith, worship, the Bible and the Christian tradition and above all people.

But it is with people where we, and many churches are struggling after the pandemic. Perhaps due to all the uncertainty people are reluctant to come forward for voluntary roles in the church, especially to take on responsibility as churchwardens and in other responsible roles. We are not the only church in the city to have only one churchwarden in office. The Standing Committee would like to suggest that we adjust the expectations of Churchwardens so that they would serve for a few years perhaps two or three, rather than five and six, but that they would be part of a supportive team where others who would be prepared to serve might learn and help and grow into the role. If you feel that this might be you and that you would be excited and willing to be part of this please have a word with myself or Glynis. She isn't here today so I can express my appreciation of Glynis's huge contribution to our parish life without embarrassing her - and also thank those of you who are supporting her in her role in a variety of ways. It is vital that we do find others to share in this work as a parish can't function effectively without any churchwardens so we do need to crack this one somehow! Thank you for your prayer and support as we look for a way ahead in finding one or more churchwardens and potential wardens.

When Jesus sent out his disciples two by two with very little equipment he wasn't setting up a church! But he was showing that we shouldn't be in ministry alone and that we need fewer resources for our work than we might imagine. Caring for each other as we travel together into the future of God's church is going to be vital if we are to connect with those around us and care for them. Let us pray that God will renew his gifts of faith, hope and love in each of us that we may know ourselves to be fully equipped, even when we feel decidedly inadequate.