

Vicar's report 2014: Will we run the race?

There are many things to be very thankful for from the last year. Reading through the different reports flags that up, so I hope you'll read them and give thanks. One of the hard things about the last few months has been seeing some much loved congregation members die, and others being side-lined through ill health. That's been quite hard, hasn't it? I think we've felt that as a congregation; for many of us this has been quite a tough year.

Now in that, at the same time, there are things to learn and things to be thankful for. We've had some amazing opportunities to rejoice in the difference that the resurrection of Jesus makes to us, and to tell that to others. I only have to think about Margaret at Mike's funeral telling all those people about how he became a Christian and what a difference that made to him and to her, and you know what I mean. We really do have the only message that makes any real difference in the face of death. The message of the risen Jesus. It's good news, isn't it? Hopefully these last few months have underlined that for us, even in the sadness of some people leaving us to go home to the Lord.

But as well I think the Lord has some important challenges for us which we need to respond to at this time. So let's look at Hebrews chapter 12 and see what he says:

Hebrews 12:1-2 *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. ² Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Look closely at those verses and you can see that there are two groups of people there. The picture is of a sporting stadium, a running track, where there are some people up in the stands – the witnesses – watching, and there are other people on the track, running. Do you see that? Who is watching? It's the people from the chapter before isn't it? And the chapter before is talking about great people of God who have now died. The only way to get into the stands is to have already finished the race. In this race the spectators are followers of Jesus who have now died.

So who is left on the track? It's us isn't it? It's followers of Jesus who are currently alive. "Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

So here's our challenge: **Will we run the race?**

Violet, Alice and Mike have gone to take their place in the stands. Tom is way ahead of us: even now he's lunging for the finishing tape. So who is going to run the race now? Who is going to be the people of prayer that they once were now? Who is going to be godly and patient and loving now? Who is going to be the tireless evangelists, telling people about Jesus now? Who is going to serve diligently, week by week, in all weathers now? It can't be them any more, can it? They're not in the race any more. It has to be us, doesn't it? We're the ones on the track now. We're the runners.

So how do we run? We throw off the stuff that weighs us down, and we run with endurance. That's what it says in this verse isn't it? "Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us."

Some of us haven't been running because we've been weighed down. We've been chasing after so many other things that our Christian discipleship has taken a back seat. We don't run well like that. You can't run a race if you're trying to go in a load of different directions. Others of us have not been

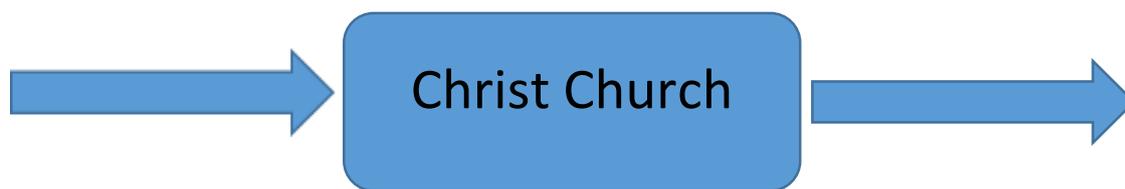
running well because we've been sitting too comfortably with our sins. We've been living contradictory lives. We don't run well like that. Because the sins get hold of us and drag us down. Throw it off, says the Lord. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

It's a challenge, isn't it? I think it's a big challenge right now, as we look out on the coming year. One of the things that encourages me most is when I see people doing this; stepping up to the plate, taking on the baton, running the race. There are reasons to be thankful as we think about this. There are people who are running better now than they ever have before. I'm so thankful to God for that. But the challenge is there for all of us. We're not spectators, we're on the track. Will we run the race?

Another thing which I think is relevant here is this: if you're running a long distance race, as you go along the landscape around you changes. It's quite a powerful image of the Christian life, this picture of running a race. It means we're going somewhere, yes, but we're not there yet. We're all still running, in the middle of the race, on the way, and we will be until we too meet with Jesus face to face at the finish.

I've been thinking about this sort of thing quite a lot in the last year. Because one of the features of life here in Christ Church at the moment is that people pass through our congregation, don't they? Churches are like that. We're not a final resting place, we're more like a motorway services. We're here to help people on their way towards being with the Lord for ever.

Or to put it in picture form, it looks a bit like this:



People come and join us – they're born, they become Christians, they move here or whatever. And people leave us too, they move away, they die and so on. That's going on all the time. What we need to be doing is making sure that as people are here with us they are growing in Jesus. So that when they leave us they're further along in that race, running better than they were when they joined us. We want people to grow in knowing and showing Jesus while they're members of Christ Church North Finchley.

It's really important that we understand that. Our aim is for people to grow in knowing and showing Jesus; we want people to grow as followers of Jesus, we want to help people on their way towards being with Jesus in glory. Christ Church North Finchley is about helping people on the way. Our aim is not that people would be members here forever. We're not the end point. We're on the way. We want people to be with Jesus forever.

Do you see the difference? If so, it ought to affect the way we do everything. When we think about running the race, taking up the baton from the likes of Tom Heriot, we're not just doing that alone, are we? We want to help each other do that. We want to help each other to grow. That will affect the way we think about all the jobs that need doing and the roles that need filling. In a few minutes we'll be electing people to different roles in the church. Why? Not just so that spaces will be filled. So that people will grow. We want people to grow as they serve in different ways. We want their service to help others to grow. Do you see? It's different, isn't it? The roles are there to serve this greater aim of helping people grow as Christians. The roles are not ends in themselves.

Realizing this can be quite tiring. Often we want to keep things as they are. We don't like it when people move on from us, either by dying or moving away. It's painful. It's difficult to have to keep on raising up new people in church; in many ways it'd be easier just to keep the people we have doing the same things for ever. But that option is not open to us. We're not here to keep things going. We're here to grow people who know and show Jesus.

You see if we really are all on the track together, all running together, we need to keep each other going in the right direction. We need to help each other to fix our eyes on Jesus. We have a wonderful fellowship at Christ Church. There is a lovely atmosphere amongst us, I've heard a number of people comment on just what a family feel there is here. That's wonderful. We need to keep remembering that we're a family with a purpose. We're all about helping each other grow in Jesus.

Here are a few concrete examples of ways I hope that will be happening in the coming year.

- Bible reading and housegroups. Shared Bible study materials for housegroups, new housegroup(s) beginning soon, people meeting to read the Bible and pray together one to one.
- New contacts with people arising from the passion for life events and community survey.
- New opportunities for service being created when people hand over ministries to others.
- New staff role of ministry apprentice, hopefully from Sept 2014.
- The encouragement of seeing the building project happen.