

**St Peter & St Paul, Old Brampton
St Lawrence, Great Barlow
Loundsley Green Church**

Rambling Rector **Issue 38, December 2011**



Permission? – don't wait

I've heard it said that the best indicator of a successful incumbency is how well the churches can manage in an interregnum. If the departing priest was someone who insisted on making all the decisions, allowing nobody else to do or say anything that threatened the priest's power, then the church community is unlikely to be well prepared to manage in a vacancy. It will be fractured and fractious, like naughty children when the teacher leaves the room. If, on the other hand, the priest encourages others to have a hand in the administration and the generation of ideas and plans for the future, and is prepared to let people have responsibility, then things may well run pretty smoothly in a vacancy. I don't wish to be a priest of the first category—I would like to be one of the second. So I'm delighted to see people volunteering to enrich the life of our churches and communities. I remember our children finding out that helping themselves to sweets and then telling us (or not), was 'better' than asking first and being told 'no'. Better, surely, to ask forgiveness than seek permission. We need to pull together and put personal preferences aside.

Growth comes from challenge

Did you see on TV recently the programme about English teenagers living with the Amish? One was pampered (smothered?) by parents; one was sponging off benefits. They grew up pretty quickly when they were thrown in the deep end. Ministers who keep their congregations in nappies stunt their growth, and congregations who expect the minister to do everything for them will never grow up. Taking responsibility for oneself is one of the Gospel messages, and it is a real healing act. Muscles and bones grow by being stressed and challenged. Healthy immune systems work when challenged (we're too clean). Some people imagine that life should be stress-free. *This is self-indulgent piffle.* Without stress, we don't grow and learn. We remain in a rut, ignorant of the big wide world with all its opportunities. We let our unchallenged prejudices corrupt us. We become like those who (Psalm 17) 'are inclosed in their own fat, and their mouth speaketh proud things.' Gospel messages again: let's take responsibility for ourselves, let's take stock of where we are, let's take risks, let's push at boundaries, let's put out into the deep, let's cast our nets on the other side—the side we've never tried before.

Live each day as 'twere thy last

If we expect healing to mean medical cure, as if biological processes can and should be reversed by the odd prayer here or there, then we live in a fool's paradise. Jesus the healer helping people come to terms with the situations they are in. Healing as acceptance of reality. Healing as preparation for future development. Healing as salvation, liberation. Heal = salve = save. Healing as at-one-ment. Why do we invest so much in doctors and drug companies? Why are they paid so much? At least part of the reason is that people can't come to terms with the fact that life is a terminal disease. We imagine that the next new drug, or treatment, or whatever, will allow us to live for ever—or at least, for that bit longer. Now, let's imagine you're expecting to kick the bucket any day, then a new drug unexpectedly becomes available and you are told you have an extra month. What will you do in that extra month? Will you travel to where you'd always wanted to go? Will you write your life story? Will you watch more TV? Will you make sure that the people you think are eejits know your opinion of them? (That's a very tempting option.) Perhaps you will try to make peace with people you know you've offended or hurt. You might even try to let people who've hurt you know that you bear them no ill will. You would then, in your last days, have a lighter heart, carry fewer burdens, and die more serenely. You—we—can start this now, by living



each day as 'twere our last. Because it might be. Life—to repeat—is a terminal disease. Wiping out this disease today means we die of something else tomorrow.

What is medicine for?

This takes me back decades to when I was a medical student and junior hospital doctor in south London. I ministered to dying babies, children and adults, and to their parents and families. I began to wonder about the distinction between medicine as easing suffering, medicine as restoration, and medicine as prolonging a life of suffering or even unconsciousness. I witnessed the switching off of life-support systems for people who had effectively 'died' months earlier. I witnessed 'treatments' that were little short of medical experiments dressed up as false hope. Research in medicine has enabled us to move on from mediaeval practices. Most medical research is of the highest ethical standards, but some is driven by human pride and greed—the enhancement of reputation—that can result in cheating and falsification. Research funded by drug companies should always be most closely scrutinized in case commercial concerns have distorted methods and/or findings (see or read Le Carré's *The Constant Gardener*). And of course, medical research is always at the mercy of charlatans. When people are at their lowest, they are at their most vulnerable. That is why quacks and frauds must be exposed for what they are. You're perhaps beginning to see that I was never cut out to be a researcher. My career in anatomy was built upon gifts as a teacher and pastor. And that is what I still do.

Irreverend Stanley

In my former parishes, I was often called Fr Stanley. I liked this, since I am a father, and at least in Derbyshire there was affection in it. Here, the tradition seems to be to call me Rev Stanley. I'm not keen on that: I don't feel particularly reverend, and anyway the title is properly used with Christian name or initial *and surname*. My own preference is to be called, at least by my face, Stanley. Or Irreverend Stanley. Institutions are obsessed with titles. The church, which should know better, is riddled with them. Reverend, Venerable, Canon, Very Reverend, Right Reverend, Most Reverend, Frightfully Reverend. All this hierarchical nonsense is a sign of an institution in trouble. It signals a delusional and inward-looking club. Who, outside the club, cares? And if any organisation should care about those outside it, it's the church. It's easy for us in the club to become institutionalized, and to imagine that our little clubby rules are important. I read church publications in which nothing controversial is ever reported and where everything is said to be wonderful. What sort of la-la land are they are talking about? We need to wake up to the fact that people see through this tripe. People see beyond spin and hypocrisy. Yes, I know it's easy for me to talk having 'enjoyed' rank and title in a former career, but we must try to see that our being obsessed with the churchy club flies in the face of reality for the world's population. Please just call me Stanley!

The Christmas message

For nine months the embryonic Lord grew in Mary's uterus. This is what Bishop Lancelot Andrewes had to say on Christmas Day 1614 about what the embryonic Christ was doing while he was in there: 'He was not idle all the time He was an embryo — all the nine months He was in the womb; but then and there He even eat out the core of corruption that cleft to our nature and us, and made both us and it an unpleasing object in the sight of God. ... [We] were by this means made beloved in Him ... this the good by Christ an embryo.' At Christmas, the message is not about donkeys, oxen, angels, shepherds, mangers and inns—fun though this might be. It's about letting the Lord and his message grow in us and fill us from the inside. 'God the Logos became what we are, in order that we may become what he himself is. ... The glory of God is a living person and the life of man is the vision of God.' (St Irenaeus). Live with delight, because one day you'll be dead.

RR in the Inter-regnum

If you'd like to contribute to Rambling Rector in the inter-regnum, please send your article to Nick Roberts, webmaster, on nick.roberts@bcs.org.

Nick will remain in contact with Fr Stanley who may produce an RR for us on an occasional basis.

