

In January 2023 I took four days on retreat at St Hilda's Priory in Whitby. My main agenda was to clarify with the Lord when I should retire as Rector of All Saints and St Andrew's Church. After a morning of prayer, I walked down to the sea. I was struck by a sudden, clear conviction that my last Sunday should be Easter Day 2024. That moment of clarity has been a great help.

Leafing through my diary, highlights of 2023 include...

January

Tom Walters became our Youth and Children's Work Assistant and served throughout the year. Tom has an unusual set of skills (as demonstrated by his amazing *Crystal Maze* in October); he also has an extraordinary gift for connecting with children and young people.

Several of our young people had performed a scratch nativity in the city centre at ChristmasFest 2022. Their enthusiasm led James Simister to suggest that a Youth Drama Group could be a refreshing way of involving them in Sunday worship. I blew the dust off my days as a drama teacher and we aimed to perform once a month, mostly at St Andrew's, with rehearsals straight after school. We have had fun. It has been a treat to see Molly, Oli, Abi, Erin, Jude and Harry grow as performers. Rehearsing the sketches has also helped their understanding of the Christian faith.

February

We held a second successful Snowdrop Festival at All Saints, this time without the snow which buried them from sight the year before. As well as various eco-themed activities and delicious refreshments, we hosted a 'writing station' as part of a city-wide project to create a bound, handwritten copy of the four gospels which was presented to King Charles as a coronation gift. The King sent a message of thanks. A printed reproduction of the gospels, to be kept at the Mansion House, will be presented to the Lord Mayor of York on 26 April 2024. Judith Twist and Anne White will represent us.

March

Following his talk on *The Reformation and the English Parish Church*, Dr Bob Whiting returned to lead us in a helpful exercise on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, based on Romans 12. Other guest speakers

at *Deeper* during the year included Rev'd Jim Roberts, with an update on the work of *ReVive*, and Matthew Band from *Compassion*.

April

Liz Barker was re-elected churchwarden at the APCM, to serve alongside Alison Hodgson and John Farrell. It was good to have her back, though in the absence of any other warden at St Andrew's, Liz had generously fulfilled many of the duties in her temporary role as 'building manager'. She was ably supported by Dave who, after several years as our Health and Safety Officer, is now stepping down. It is one of those jobs which, the better it is done, the less obvious it is that anyone is doing it, and Dave has been brilliant.

Having served as churchwarden for six years, Alison Hodgson also steps down this year. I am thankful for the gracious and creative way in which she has fulfilled the role. The same goes for John Farrell. Please keep the wardens in your prayers, especially during the vacancy when they carry legal responsibility for matters that usually fall to the Rector. Pray too for Chris Park, Judy Lindsey, Alison Walters, the PCC and the church officers. The leadership team need the wisdom, protection and peace that comes through your prayers.

Our Easter services followed a familiar pattern. One thing we did differently, at Chris's suggestion, was to take *The Gospel of Mark* to New Earswick Folk Hall on Maundy Thursday. It was lovely to perform to a big crowd, along with my son Pete, and to share Jesus with some unfamiliar faces.

May

Ahead of the King's Coronation, we held a well-attended prayer vigil at All Saints. Also in May, James took a short 'sabbatical'. He set out to identify the factors that help young people to continue in the Christian faith as they grow into young adulthood. While James gave time to prayer, study, and a survey of young adults from around the country, our youth and children's activities were led by Tom and the volunteer teams, with additional help from YoYo and The Belfrey. James presented his findings to the PCC and at *Deeper*. Our LYCIG group continues to explore ways of implementing them.

June

Kaleb Scott and Olivia Hatch arrived from the USA to serve in the parish, mainly with youth and children. They were with us for two months, during which we also welcomed a lively mission team from Biltmore, North Carolina, for one week. The planning, communication and hospitality that go into hosting a mission team from America is not inconsiderable, but ultimately worth the effort. As outsiders coming in, they are often able to stir an interest in Jesus that is harder for we boring Brits, especially in the schools.

July

The joint Summer services were held at All Saints to facilitate progress with the extension at St Andrew's. As the building work nears completion, it is possible to imagine the new facilities bustling with activity; but *impossible* to overstate the debt of gratitude that we owe to God for the gift of Keith Blanshard; and to Keith himself, for the generous gift of his time, energy, vision and expertise. I'm looking forward to dropping in when the blue curtain is finally drawn aside.

August

The Lord prompted Ian Richardson and me to have a conversation about handing on the role of Parish Safeguarding Officer. During his many years of service, safeguarding practice in the Church of England has changed beyond recognition. Ian's characteristic godly wisdom and prayerful attention to detail have steered us through. I am so grateful to God for all that Ian contributes to All Saints and St Andrew's, especially for his generosity and openness to the Holy Spirit which have kept me afloat in challenging times. We were both delighted when, after a suitable period of prayer and exploratory training, Dot Bevington agreed to be our new PSO. Dot will be brilliant. She has already taken steps to sharpen our safeguarding practice.

At the end of August, St Andrew's was again the venue for YouthFest. There was a tremendous atmosphere of faith and fun. As well as activities on site, the young people took part in several Besom gardening projects in Tang Hall.

September

Our autumn sermon series was based on research from the Baptist Firestarters' network which identified 'seven achievable habits for church growth'. The material stirred the staff team to be more committed to praying together, and when we invited others to join us we were astounded by

how many came. We now regularly have more than 20 people gathering to pray every Monday morning. The material caught the imagination of the Small Groups, and the autumn programme included other events to help us focus on our identity, vision and values. My aim was to help prepare the church for the upcoming vacancy which was still to be announced.

Heyin Chun became the latest person to join the staff as an intern. Over the last 16 years, we have given 15 young adults an opportunity to spend a year exploring their sense of calling to Christian ministry. Six are now Anglican clergy; others are serving Christ in other ways. We have also had at least six ordinands on placement for periods ranging from two weeks to two years. It has all been made possible by the generosity of the church family which is willing to let inexperienced people 'have a go'. It has been a privilege to help so many find their feet as Christian leaders.

Thoroughly experienced, Chris and Eleanor Clarke were licensed as Authorised Lay Ministers by the Archbishop of York in a service at York Minster. The main focus of their ministry is at Hartrigg Oaks.

Several of us attended a meeting with Archbishop Stephen to affirm our commitment to orthodox Christian doctrine in the messy and upsetting debate about the blessing of same-sex sexual relationships. St Barnabas, Swanland, was packed with people of the same mind. Two of our group were invited to speak.

October

We gave generously to support York Foodbank through our Harvest Thanksgiving services. The Foodbank manager, Adam Raffell, joined us for our 7-11 Prayer event in Prayer and Gift Week. Gift Day brought in a glorious total of £25,844 which made all the difference. And James Simister let me know that he was leaving...

One of my proudest achievements is that I was on the interview panel that brought James to York in 2006 when we served together at St Michael le Belfrey. I was thrilled, five years later, when he joined us at All Saints and St Andrew's. James' contribution to our mission and ministry over the last 12 years has been immense. He has been an exciting and gifted Youth and Children's Leader, but his love for Jesus is infectious across the board. James is creative, prayerful, and a constant spring of fresh ideas. He is kind, hard-working and ambitious for the Kingdom of God. He often sees the gifts and potential in other people before they

know it themselves. It was the inspiring quality of James' work that attracted three years of financial support from Crestview church, Texas. In recent times, his focus extended to include young adults, mainly through our experimental new worshipping community, *Presence Live*, which ran until the end of 2023. Personally, serving alongside James has been great fun. He stopped me from getting stuck and boring, and I hope that I helped him think through some of his whackier plans. He is greatly missed, as are Katy, Molly, Toby and Elliot – though Molly continues to help as a young leader at Kidz Klub. James is now settling in as the Minister for Outreach at York Community Church. My thanks to everyone who has stepped up to support our children and young people as we search for the right next Youth and Children's Leader, and especially to Heather Wraight for coordinating it all.

November

The annual memorial service on Remembrance Sunday attracted an unusually large congregation. We also welcomed the Diocesan 'green ambassador' Rev'd Jan Nobel to speak at a joint service on the theme of caring for creation. Jan's input was greatly appreciated.

December

The All Saints and St Andrew's Church Lads' and Church Girls' Brigade band gave a splendid Christmas concert which was enthusiastically received. The audience included the Civic Party and national leaders of Brigade. It was a wonderful conclusion to a year in which our Brigade company, disbanded two years earlier, was re-formed under the very capable leadership of Robbie and Sarah O'Brien. Robbie's expert musicianship, Sarah's experience of working with children, and their shared enthusiasm are a mighty combination.

The Brigade band also lent a suitably Victorian flavour to our Carol Service based on dramatized readings from Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. Kathryn Coombes and Heather Richardson led the choir, and an eclectic company of actors and readers included Willie Edwards, Ned Lunn, Phil Massey, Oliver Popely, Stephen Poulter, Jude Pradeep, Molly Simister, Frances Simon, Judith Twist and myself. There were beggars and Victorian party games before the service, and the opportunity to leave our chains in the manger during the prayers.

Also at Christmas, we took a 'live' nativity scene to New Earswick and Monk's Cross. Passers-by were invited to join in the singing and take a selfie beside

the manger. We welcomed Huntington Primary Academy to All Saints, and New Earswick Primary Academy to St Andrew's for their school carol services; and Chris led a service for York Against Cancer at the Ryedale Stadium. We also hosted a memorial service for Darley Funeral Directors. Most of those who attended had had secular funerals for their relatives, so it was good to welcome them to church, sing carols, and pray with them. On Christmas Eve, the Christingle services at both All Saints and St Andrew's were packed, which was encouraging after last year's post-Covid attendance.

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And that's me done! It has been the most tremendous privilege to serve here, alongside Adele. We have loved being part of this church and thank God for the adventures we've shared over the last 16 years, for the dear friends we've made, and for the people we have served with, some of them now with the Lord. Thank you for loving us through the ups and downs, especially through the hardest thing we have ever endured when our daughter Sarah lost her battle with Cystic Fibrosis. She loved this church, too. It is very hard to leave, but the time is right. The church needs a different sort of leader for a new season, and we are tired! In many ways, All Saints and St Andrew's Church is a very ordinary parish church serving its local community – and yet it is an extraordinary fellowship, blessed by God, redeemed by Christ, filled with the Spirit, loving, welcoming and supportive, 'Knowing Jesus and making him known in our community and beyond' and (as someone once said) punching above its weight. We'll be praying for you through the vacancy, and we look forward to hearing how the story continues.

God bless you.

Rev'd Ian Birkinshaw
21.3.24