

***PRIEST'S PROSPECTIVE* July 2005**



The Vine and the branches...

Firstly I must thank you for your warm welcome and response to my ministry in your midst. Zahra and I feel we have been able to get to know many folk and begin to take part in the community at West Moors.

I have been quizzed as to the title of this column by some learned friends – Priest's Prospective! Surely you meant perspective? No, it is a deliberate pun on the fact that I remain in prospect for the job – and together we need to review and marshal our prospects, for the future effectiveness of our shared mission in West Moors.

'Mission' is a buzz-word in the church today. Until the last couple of years statistics have shown a steady decline in attendance within the C of E. A church that is shaped by an understanding of mission is the model that Salisbury Diocese and much of the church has adopted in its approval of the report 'Mission Shaped Church'.

Decline is not inevitable or unstoppable. Statistics show that one in three parish churches is growing, whilst two in three sadly are declining or at best static. Where does our church fit in this pattern? What are our prospects? Quite simply I want to say that it is up to us. The responsibility is ours and it is my belief that we are only limited by lack of faith in God and commitment to mission.

Our Lord taught us by the use of parables – a vine is recognised by its fruit – he tells us that to be fruitful we (the branches) must remain in him. Growing churches are based around congregations that do more than meet for worship once a week on Sundays. They understand and are committed to growth – both personal, in terms of spirituality and understanding, and corporately, in terms of spreading the Gospel by word and action.

A branch that produces no fruit is cut off, it serves no purpose, and in fact it weakens the vine. Other branches, which bear some fruit, are pruned to produce more fruit.

I believe the Church is in this process of pruning. The Parish of West Moors has to make the personal and corporate commitment to grow closer to Christ and to be proactive in mission. (Please read John chapter 15).

The 'world' in which we live doesn't exactly 'hate us'. We cannot claim to be persecuted, but for much of 'the world' we are seen as an irrelevance, an occasional optional seasonal extra, a last hope at the final ditch. Perhaps this is because the world promises a more immediately attractive form of salvation. Relative prosperity fosters self-belief and thus indifference to God. We as followers of Christ must remain in him and seek to grow closer to him. We need to be thoughtful and reflective people as we pray and wait on God's Holy Spirit to guide us. We need to be active people as we take our cross and follow Christ, otherwise we are unworthy of him (Matthew 10:38). We must love one another; in this way we will grow more joyful and become a wholly attractive and welcoming community. We need to ask God our Father for new folk to join with us and make his church stronger. We need to trust in Him, who answers the prayers of the faithful.

Jesus Christ chose you and me, and appointed us to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. 'Then the Father will give us whatever we ask in Jesus' name'.

Do you dare to believe this? I certainly do and I feel called by God to serve and to help lead a community that understands the absolute necessity to be close knit (in the vine), and the command to be fruitful (a growing church).

This is the prospect I lay before you. I will encourage, enable and collaborate with you. I will expect you to respond personally and corporately to the call of Christ to Mission, as you are able. It is His church and we all serve his purpose, not our own. God is faithful to the faithful!

Many blessings in God; Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Andrew Rowland - Acting Priest in Charge

Summer is a time for outdoor eating!

Despite some mixed weather so far this summer we have managed some outdoor activities, especially our favourite – eating outdoors!



We have managed a few barbeques both at home in the garden, and on Bournemouth beach on Friday evenings at Durley Chine, prior to the Firework display (each Friday mid-July to end August). Our eldest son John, popped backed from university in London for a few days and we enjoyed some family days out to Lulworth, to Monkey World and to Christchurch and some posh nosh-ups together.

Do you remember my listing of my three top personal priorities in a recent sermon – 1. Chelsea to win the Premiership 2. Ferrari to win the Championship and 3. England to win the Ashes – well things are looking up, Chelsea have won the Charity Shield, beating The Arsenal, Ferrari have finally got some tyres that work and, praise God, England squared the Ashes series at Edgbaston (did you ever loose faith that they would?) and as I write, have made a bright start at Old Trafford. Perhaps a little irreverent you might rightly think – but summer is a time for fun and recreation and some relaxation. My personal work load reduces during the six weeks of the School summer holidays as all the assembly and Governor duties of my two schools (St Mary's First and Three Legged Cross First School) cease for a while. So one gets a little 'lighter' in spirit in the holidays.

In retrospect, I very much enjoyed and benefited from my Retreat, walking from Kingswear (Dartmouth) to Lyme Regis along the coastal path. The weather wasn't terribly kind – it was either drizzling, pouring or blowing. One morning, just past Torquay, I trudged down the hill from Thatcher Point towards Babbacombe alongside the sea wall, and an ice-cream van pulled up. Despite the drizzle and relative cold I was ready for breakfast so I sequentially ordered a strawberry split, an hot-

dog and then a mug of chocolate. There was just me and David, the young man who was my chef. “On holiday?” “No, actually I’m on Retreat”. “Oh?” “I’m a ‘vicar’ using a long walk as a means for spiritual R&R”. “Oh, are you part of the One Thousand Man March?” I stoically looked around, observing a bleak and deserted scene and commented, “No I’m on my own.... just me and the Lord!”. “Oh, you’ll be pleased with me”, said David, producing a bible. “I must be the only ice-cream van driver who reads the bible between customers and there aren’t many in this weather”. We spent half-an hour in conversation. David was a relatively new Christian; “I gave my heart to the Lord and was born again following an Alpha Course”. My damp, cold, dreary spirit was instantly lifted high amongst the ordinariness and the profane (I mean, ice cream, hot dogs and chocolate for breakfast!!?).



This young, new Christian served me exactly what I needed – encouragement and a sign that the God of mission is at work everywhere and especially in the thousands of Alpha Courses running. There we shared testimony, Christian fraternity, spoke of various dilemmas that contemporary living raises – such as working on Sundays – I pointed out that I had to as well! As we shared food and drink so it became a Communion service, as I realised that it was Wednesday and approaching 10.00 am. It was a good meal, outdoors eating of food both physical and spiritual. My gratitude to Almighty God for providing this ‘outdoor food’, to David for boldly sharing his faith and to some person unknown, somewhere, who had invited David to Alpha. As we prepare for Alpha at Saint Mary’s I encourage you all to take the real opportunity to do the course and then be ready to encourage others – the ‘Davids’ of our community to join us in January. We need to do some ‘outdoor eating’ – sharing the ‘food’ we have been given with others, who are outside the church. After all Jesus fed the five thousand men, the women and the children outdoors - where there is plenty of space and where ordinary life is found in abundance.



Happy re-creation this summer!

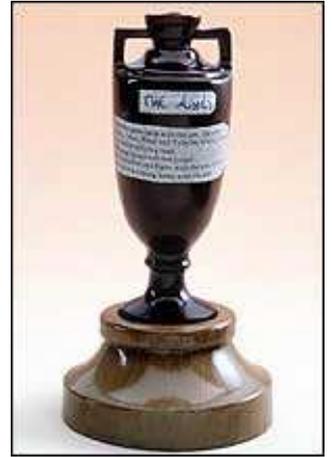
Andrew Rowland - Acting Priest in Charge

PRIESTS' PROSPECTIVE October 2005

*England's Glorious Summer –
a parable for life?*

England b-Ashes-d the Aussies!

A f-Ashes-tastic victory!



Cricket fever has progressively gripped the attention of much of the nation this summer, as after a poor start at Lord's, the England cricket team have forged their way to victory over Australia, our greatest rivals – the 'old enemy'. English cricket, which was dead and cremated – the remains deposited in the famous urn – has been resurrected to new life. After five nail-biting and gruelling Tests that produced what the pundits have celebrated as the most thrilling Ashes Series ever, English pride and honour is restored, thanks to twelve heroes among them Andrew 'Freddie' Flintoff, the new Botham.

One of the highlights for me was that moment on the penultimate day at the Oval when 35,000 fans, having paid good money to watch cricket, were willing the Umpires to offer 'The Light' to the England batsmen, and thus to suspend play. "Off, off" the crowds bellowed as conditions turned somewhat gloomy. The final outcome was more important than the spectacle – what selfless devotion by the fans!??

In one of the most wonderful and humorous sporting moments I can recall, as the English fans put up their umbrellas to will it to rain in the slight gloom, so the Australian fans took off their shirts to sunbathe in the bright sunshine they imagined. Half an hour later the Umpires resumed play as conditions brightened sufficiently. The Aussie cricketers walked onto the field beaming as they each sported dark sunglasses – and the England crowds appreciating this sporting humour thundered with applause.

How this speaks of the human condition – how we each are quite capable of interpreting conditions differently according to a particular perspective – a lens – that we bring which colours our view of life.

I think there have been some eleven Captains of the English Cricket Team since the last Ashes win eighteen years ago. Ultimately none of them have achieved what Michael Vaughn has and yet they have all played the game and sought victory. Teams have ups and downs, good times and bad – but the important thing is that the players go out to play according to the best of their ability – and go out with the hope and expectation of victory. As a football referee I know that any team that feels vanquished before going out to play, will loose. A team that has faith, that is studied in technique and tactics, that has trained and developed its skills, will be prepared and expecting to win.

A church is like a team – it has many players – each with particular roles to play. A church needs to train and hone its abilities so that it may increase in confidence, that it may see clearly through a lens that is not darkened by disbelief and disparateness. A team needs a Captain around whom the individual players can unite. A Captain will bring ideas and introduce tactics that he believes will enable the team to combine and to give of their best. Captains have to take control to ensure focus, but captains also have to trust and let the team members play their part. A captain needs the co-operation and confidence of his team, the recognition that changes have to be made for the sake of the ultimate goal – victory.

Having happily settled in and had time to assess the players, this captain is preparing to consult with the management (PCC) to make some changes. Woodrow Wyatt said, “If you want to make enemies, just change something”. “The devil is in the detail!” As we seek to expand and grow – a winning team always draws strong support – so I ask that you set your eyes firmly on the ultimate goal, and whether it feels like gloom or sunshine from your perspective, that you will support a new vision for our team at Saint Mary’s. I believe in resurrection; out of the ‘Ashes’ God is always ready to raise us up to new life. Do you believe this, or are you going onto the field of play with little expectation? We’ve had a glorious summer at Saint Mary’s and there is much to look forward to. “On, On” we will go together using all the team building tactics we can muster.

Celebrating in Christ Jesus – Andrew Rowland (acting priest in charge).

PRIEST'S PROSPECTIVE *November 2005*

I'm looking forward to Advent and Christmas!

Many of us start to groan when we see Christmasy things appearing in the shops and this is certainly the case in my favourite Supermarket. Those 'once-a-year delicacies like Pannetone cake are on display – and yet it is only November and I have to wait. Then there is the Stollen Cake, rich with almonds, rum and marzipan...but it is only November and I've got to wait. Look! The mulled wine is on offer...but it is only November and I must wait...oh and deep filled mince pies and I really should wait!!!



So I'm waiting and watching once again this year. I'm watching, waiting and wondering.

What if we had an act of worship every Sunday through the Advent Season. It would help me with the watching and waiting...and build-up the sensation of the season and oh – here's an idea...what if we ended each afternoon service with Mince Pies and Mulled Wine. Yes, that will do nicely and the good people of West Moors can come and worship in a variety of ways and at the end they will have a taste of heaven! Mmmm, now I really can't wait!

So that's a thoroughly cheerful prospect for us all – my advert is now broadcast – live to the village.

'At Saint Mary's this year,
Come and join in with the cheer'

Do please spread the word and remember that Advent and Christmas is a time when he have a wonderful opportunity to welcome visitors into church. Let them feel the warmth and cheer of the place. Do come and encourage friends and neighbours to, 'taste and see that the Lord is

good'! Parents do come with Children (who are always especially welcome) to the Christingle and Crib services – let them feel the anticipation and wonder of Christmas – as we celebrate the coming of our Lord Jesus.

It may be a while since they last visited – so let them know that the love of God is embodied in his church here, and that his people are looking forward to Christmas. We've tried to include something for all this Advent – here's the intended programme: -

27 th November 4pm	Advent Carol Service
4 th December 4pm	Taize Service
11 th December 4pm	BCP Choral Evensong
18 th December 10am	Christingle Service
6pm	Service of Nine Lessons and Carols
19 th December 10am	St Mary's School Christingle Service
24 th December 4pm	Blessing of the Crib
11.30 pm	Midnight Mass
25 th December 10 am	Informal Family Communion at Christmas
1 st January '06 10 am	Family Communion
8 th January '06...	Epiphany

So this is a 'feast of soul food' and also a time to enjoy each other's company in the presence of God. It's a time of Peace and Goodwill!

The world needs to be reassured as to the love of God for all his people. At Advent we watch and we wait – we watch for signs – we remember that Christ will come again. We renew ourselves as we enter once again into the story of Christmas. The message from God to each of us is his gift of life and hope.

I'm looking forward to Advent and Christmas – I can barely wait!

Andrew Rowland - Acting Priest in Charge

PRIEST'S PROSPECTIVE Dec 2005



Wise men are looking for Jesus!



Wise people are looking forwards like these famous chaps on their camels. They are looking for a sign (in this case a star) and they are looking forwards. There are all kinds of signs in the world that enable us to see things. In church we use all kinds of signs and symbols to point towards what we believe – they help us keep looking forwards! Signs are not important in themselves – they only point towards something else.

I remember a few years ago sitting on a camel ‘meself’; just like Laurence of Arabia I looked. I expect a few of you also have been down by the Pyramids at Giza, in Egypt. I didn’t miss the sign that the pyramids themselves – built thousands of years before Christ – point up towards the sky, towards eternity. The bible tells us (as do many other ancient writings) that man has been searching for God for as long as he has lived. Often it seems man cannot see God because he gets confused and hung-up on the signs. Sometimes in church we seem to spend so much time worrying and wondering about the signs we use to celebrate and share our faith, that we miss the obvious.

I don’t really mind what sign, symbols or language I use to ‘search the skies’ for God, because I know he is with us always. Any worship focused and directed towards God is holy and acceptable. Of course we all have our favourite ‘ways’ – just as we have our favourite ‘stars’, but it is the ‘something else’ that is important. What sense of the ‘other’ do you have? Christmas is a time which is Holy – it is special, set-apart by nearly everyone, whether religious or not.

What’s all the rush about? What does it all point towards? Not a sign at all. It points to a God who came and lived amongst us – something tangible, real, a God that we can touch – who even now touches our minds and hearts.

Wise men are looking for Jesus – but they won't find him in the stars, for God is with us (Immanuel) and I pray that over the coming days, months and years I might point some of you in the right direction – towards the light of Christ. That is the ministry that I exercise in this 'O Little Town' as I'm licensed, given a key, ring the bell and pour water into the Font and installed in a chair (I do hope it's not painful!).

Don't let the signs and symbols, and those who fuss about them unduly prevent you from seeing God. Don't be put off from the most precious gift there is; that is the love of God expressed perfectly in Jesus Christ. Come and see what is on show – for God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not distant – he is here and we invite you to come towards the light. The Wise men had to travel many miles to find Jesus – but you don't!

Some things are really just signs, but others have fundamental meaning. As I accept the Chalice and Patten and The Holy Bible that you will present me on January 25th, so with the help of God I come to be your minister of Word and Sacrament, to be with you as – just as Jesus came into the world and later the Wise Men arrived. So Jesus comes at Christmas and in Epiphany I come to you.

I'm looking forward, not backwards - to see what our wonderful God will do. Now has anyone got a spare pair of keys to the vicarage garage so that I can park my camel?

Do come and bring others to any of the services over Advent and Christmas, with every blessing, in the name of Jesus.

Andrew Rowland - Acting Priest in Charge

PS The next Alpha Courses start at the end of January – ring for details.