

"NEW YEAR" ADDRESS to the congregation – Feast of the Epiphany 2019

On this day, we celebrate the wonderfully mystical story of the Wise Men – the great Festival of the Epiphany, used in part to illustrate the universal draw of the Christ-Child and to take that same Child's impact back into far-off lands and peoples. The great story of Jesus has begun its global journey – and has, as we are testament to, grown into the vast empire of modern-day Christianity. The gift of the Christ-Child to that same world has been ever-giving and considered generous.

These same Wise Men brought gifts themselves – they handed, we are told, an exotic mixture of elements to the Child and His Mother; gifts which in modern understanding are both ethereal in tone and fascinating in nature. Whilst no doubt bizarre to our twenty-first century thinking, they represent vast wealth and power in their varied ways, and provide the story with a clear indication of expectation on the part of others who encounter Christ, and so the seeds of giving to God are planted: giving that is of value, sacrificial, generous and without question.

This mantra thus became the means by which countless generations have maintained the faith's organisations and structures. Without such gifts – and in particular those of a more monetary nature – the establishment would never have survived. Whatever means history has dictated has hopefully resulted in enough income to serve the needs of the Church in every age.

And people have, for the most part, given of it voluntarily and with sacrifice. They have seen – as scripture has alluded to – such giving as part of their commitment, their allegiance, and their desire to service the mechanisms of faith in the here and now. Our generation is no different, and we are clear that in order to experience and enjoy opportunity to engage with God on a corporate, community-based level, we have a responsibility towards financing such. If we want a church to attend, a service to be part of, a priest to minister to us, and a communion-wafer to receive, it all has to be paid for. It does not, sadly, fall from the sky like manna in the days of Moses, however much we might like to wish it did!

And so it must be paid for – and the core of this address is to reveal to you how challenging our financial situation now is at the beginning of 2019 – and how we are simply going to have to pay more for our membership if we want it to continue in its present format. Giving has to increase, in whatever form we can muster. In an ideal world, such might be achieved by vastly increasing the numbers within the congregation, but valiant efforts to achieve that have systematically failed – so we are left with one stark reality: those already in the church will have to try their best to give substantially more, difficult though that might be, particularly for those of you on fixed or no income.

2019 marks the start of the Church of England's new method of charging the church for its ministry. Across the country, there is now a minimum charge on the parish for clergy, which in Guildford diocese for 2019 is **£57,915**. This has to be paid if a church wants a priest, and in theory if it is not paid, then there is no priest, and that inevitably requires major pastoral re-organisation of that particular church. On top of this ministry cost will come an area charge which reflects individual diocesan needs – this will vary across the country, but effectively means that the £57,915 is only the start, the final figure will be much higher.

Parishes such as ours have been identified by the diocese as 'vulnerable' and we are in essence on a 'hit-list', but it's a friendly one (we hope!). It is sincerely hoped that we will not have to close, and we have been generously granted a 5-year transition period, 2019-2023, during which the new charges will be phased in, which is the maximum period permissible. By 2023 we will, though, be in line with the standard system, and the projected ministry figure for that year is **£69,280**.

These figures don't, I suspect, mean a great deal to most of us – but the percentages involved do, and it is to these that I want to draw your attention. In 2019 we – starting from this week - must find another **8.8%** of income each month to cover the charge to the diocese; without it, I theoretically disappear, although I hasten to add that I'm not getting an 8.8% pay-rise! From today, we are having to ask every single one of you to consider putting 8.8% more in the plate every week. We have to find **£4,207** per month, which is **£342** more than in 2018. For every pound you kindly and generously give, we need another 8.8p from you. Read like that, it doesn't seem quite as grim! Your £5 collection becomes £5.44, your £20 becomes £21.76, and so on. If we all put another 8.8% in, we will hopefully reach our target of £4,207 at the end of the month – and then we have to keep those new levels up throughout the whole year. Of course, if you could round such up to the next whole pound, all the better – and we thank you now for your generosity.

One other way you can offer an increased giving is by a one-off annual donation – you can, as I am planning to do, simply calculate what 8.8% of your annual figure is, and give it as one lump sum, which means that your regular giving remains at the current level. So, if your annual giving is £100, then the top-up is a further £8.80, and so on. Again, rounded-up figures are greatly appreciated – and if you are a tax-payer, to GiftAid such is even more generous, at no additional cost to you [please use one of the **blue** envelopes, which are freely available at the back of the church].

By 2023 – despite by then having to increase our giving by 49.3% - we will be well on our way to surviving if everyone realises their contribution and does their bit. We so want to stay open, to stay valued, to stay alive; and we want to be the Wise Men and Women – the Wise People – of today's giving to the Christ-Child. By your generosity, we can achieve such, so hold on to 2019's 'slogan' figure of all the eights (8.8%) and thank you for all that you can do to help St. Mark's be around for just a little bit longer!

Fr. Ian
6/1/19