

## Parish of Alston Moor – Vicar’s Report for 2023 (8<sup>th</sup> May, 2024)

It isn’t always easy to know where to start with a report like this: do I begin with the big, special events or the regular life of the church? With services or social life, community engagement or buildings, committees or congregations?

But more important than anything we do, I think, is who we are – and why we are here. So I want to start by affirming what an exceptional group of congregations God is shaping us into. Our numbers may be small, we may struggle to fill all the roles we need and we may be operating on a shoestring; but the warmth, the welcome, the hospitality and the generosity of spirit – within congregations and across them, even across denominations – is extraordinary.

For all the challenges we face, the Holy Spirit is doing exciting things here, and it’s a joy to be a part of the life of the Church on Alston Moor.

### Worship

At the heart of what we do, of course, is prayer worship – the lifeblood which connects us to God and which nourishes us, gives us strength to serve our communities. With Bar, Richard, Richard and Andy – all gifted preachers – and Lizzie our Lay Minister, we are well served; and we are fortunate to be able to call on Stephen Robbins and Philip Greenhalgh, both retired priests from time to time as well.

We have continued to offer services at least monthly in five of our six churches (and in 2024 have just resumed monthly services in Garrigill), so that there is at least one service of Holy Communion in the parish every Sunday. Morning and Evening Prayer are said regularly in Alston, and once a week in Nenthead; and practically all the services in Alston are livestreamed for the sake of the small number of worshippers who join us online. Our Friday Night Prayer online is also appreciated by a number of people.

‘Come & Sing Evensong’ in Kirkhaugh, and the variety of special services in Knaresdale, all seem to be working well, as does the mix of services in Lambley and the established pattern in Nenthead which Madeleine, assisted by James, maintained throughout the year. The congregation in Nenthead seems to be growing, and is in particularly good heart!

New initiatives this year have been the ecumenical Holy Communion at the Chat Room on a Thursday lunchtime – a particularly special service; and the parish prayer group on a Monday evening, led by Richard Pattison, which focusses particularly on prayer for the parish’s mission and ministry.

We make some provision for children: all age services in Lambley, special services in Knaresdale, our fifth Sunday online services and the crib service. It would be good to do even more, but that’s as much as we have the capacity for at present.

In 2023 we welcomed eight new members of the Church family through baptism, and two couples celebrated a marriage in church. We also commended seven people to God at funerals, including our beloved Janice Routledge. May she rest in peace and rise in glory.

Sadly, a number of our regulars have also left the area, among them Linda and Neil, and the Bramwell family. But others move into the area, and it’s always a delight to see new faces become familiar faces, then valued and active members of our congregations.

### Church and Community Life

#### Structures and meetings

Our PCC and Standing Committee continue to meet regularly, as do the DCCs in Alston and Kirkhaugh. The Leadership Team meets from time to time, socially as well as for business, but the open meetings we hold 3-4 times a year are not attracting much interest beyond the team; perhaps we need to rethink these.

There may be a need for occasional open meetings for the individual congregations, perhaps as a social occasion, to share ideas and build up our fellowship too – something to explore in 2024?

I think it's fair to say that we are not yet really on top of building maintenance: there is always an awful lot to do, and it's hard to keep an overview of so many maintenance and development projects! We have considered setting up a buildings committee – if anyone has any interest or expertise in this, do please let us know! A church and churchyard maintenance schedule would also be helpful – something to work on in the coming months.

I'm immensely grateful for all that these different groups do to keep the churches running smoothly. Equally valuable in a different way is the Pastoral Visiting Team, which helps to keep pastoral care at the forefront of our minds. The Green Team has had a couple of years off; I hope that we will find the capacity to revive it this year.

### **Ecumenical**

We are fortunate to have such good friends in our Christian brothers and sisters on the Moor, with several people worshipping in more than one congregation, musicians playing for multiple congregations, and warm relationships among laity and clergy alike. The ecumenical Fraternal group (a gathering of both clergy and lay leaders from the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches) meets regularly; and we have shared a number of events – the Lent and Advent groups, the Covenant Service and Harvest Festival, services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the World Day of Prayer, the Summer Gathering at the Nook, the All Souls service. It was a particular joy to be invited to join our Catholic brothers and sisters for the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of St Wulstan's Chapel in September. And we hosted several Methodist funerals in 2023.

### **Community engagement**

One of the most visible – or rather, audible – signs of the church's presence in Alston is the carillon, which is so expertly played by Josephine every Sunday morning, as well as on other occasions: this is hugely appreciated by the wider community, and regularly attracts positive comments on Facebook!

The Alston Essentials prescription delivery service and the outstanding *Faith in the Moor* magazine are the most visible faces of our engagement with the community. Less visible but also important, the church is represented on the Alston Moor Emergency Response Group and the Alston Moor Area Planning Group. It says a great deal for our standing in the community that we are welcomed without question as partners in these groups.

We continue to have good relationships with the schools of the Alston Moor Federation; and though we were sad to say farewell to Gill the Principal on her retirement, I'm delighted that her successor, Mr Rob Dawson, is keen to keep the connections going. We host services for the schools in both Alston and Nenthead churches several times a year, and the students from Nenthead School regularly produce works of art to adorn our churches. I haven't led many school assemblies in the past year; this is an area to develop.

In Knaresdale, St Jude's Coffee Stop continues to be greatly valued and really helps to draw the community together, and to draw members of the wider community into church life; and the new 'Coffee Shop' in Garrigill looks likely to become very popular too.

We are building up an increasingly diverse programme of events in our churches – not just the Alston Art Exhibition but also events in Knaresdale church and Community Hall, and we hope to have an event or two in Nenthead church in 2024. Notable in 2023 was Alston Live's first event in St Augustine's, a very well attended event in July featuring among others the Brothers Gillespie; and the appearance of 'Elvis' in August! Our regular Beer'n'Hymns attracted wider attention in 2023, and I was interviewed about it on BBC Radio Cumbria!

### **Developments in Knaresdale**

We are still moving – slowly – towards the lifting of the covenant on the Old Rectory; I think we are approaching the final legal hurdle. This has been frustratingly slow, but thankfully we have been able to maintain a positive relationship with the Knarsdale Estate and the Kirkstyle Inn, who kindly provided refreshments for us after services on several occasions. We still hope to install improved heating, as well as

toilets and kitchen facilities, in due course; but there is significant maintenance work to be done first.

### **Rekindling St Augustine's**

In Alston, too, progress has been painfully slow, largely because of delays by solicitors, not of our making. But we have now received some of Joan's legacy and will be in a position to tender for architects soon. The Diocesan Advisory Committee, which visited us in April 2023, was excited by our plans and made some helpful suggestions. I do hope external works may start in 2025, and internal reordering as soon as possible thereafter.

### **The Wider Church**

On 22<sup>nd</sup> April, Bishop Helen Ann was installed as our new diocesan Bishop. We look forward to welcoming her to Alston Moor in due course – she apparently has fond memories of coming here for Outward Bound courses as a teenager! Archdeacon Catherine also conducted her visitations (inspections) in person in 2023, and was made welcome in all our six churches.

### **Deanery**

We enjoyed a full year with a complete team of clergy in the deanery – a rare occurrence! There has been some reorganisation of the boundaries of the 'Parishes On The Wall'; those in the West are now in the charge of the Revd Steve Wright in Haltwhistle; and with the retirement of Jeremy Thompson at the end of 2023, the parishes in the East will be grouped under the Vicar of Haydon Bridge, the Revd Ollie Dempsey (to be inducted into the parish next week)

### **Diocesan Roles**

After 4½ years as the Bishop's Adviser on the Environment, I stepped down at the end of 2023. I have found it an immensely fulfilling (as well as sometimes frustrating!) role, but no longer felt I had the capacity to carry out that role effectively as well as being your vicar. I continue as a member of the Environment Working Group, and as one of the diocesan Emergency Response Team (though I have yet to be called on in practice, and hope that will continue to be the case!)

### **Looking to the Future**

There is a lot to be hopeful and excited about for the coming years: the Rekindling project in Alston, the possibility of reordering in Knaresdale, the signs of new life in Garrigill, and possibility of developing a permanent exhibition in the church there. Not forgetting, of course, the regular, steady life of all six churches, loving and praying and serving their communities.

In the coming months, there are four particular areas we will need to address:

- 1) Stewardship: the parishes of the deanery are all committed to holding a stewardship campaign or similar this year, to encourage an increase in giving to the churches, both from the regular congregations and potentially from the wider community. Our generosity to the church is a mark of our faithfulness to God – and a practical necessity if the churches are to continue to thrive and serve our communities effectively.
- 2) Mission Action Plan: we don't at present have a plan, so we propose to have a half day in the summer to listen to where God might be calling us, and formulate a plan.
- 3) Inclusivity: questions of inclusivity, sexuality and relationships have been a source of some controversy in the wider church in recent years. Later this year our PCC will be considering how we can respond positively and offer the warmest possible welcome to everyone.
- 4) Financial structures: the receipt of Joan's legacy means that we will need to register with the Charity Commission, which will require changes to the way we manage our accounts. We will need to consider how we can streamline them, so as to meet Charity Commission requirements without their being an undue burden on our treasurers.

## Personal

After several years of health problems, and a month off in July for surgery, I'm now very happy to have a clean bill of health! Many thanks to you all for your kindness, love and support through a difficult time.

You will have gathered from the rest of this report how much I love being here as your Vicar. But sadly, all good things come to an end, and there will come a point when you need new ideas and input, and I need a new challenge. I have no immediate plans to move, but I think it likely that we will be on the move in the next couple of years; so one priority is 'succession planning' – making myself redundant, so that when the time comes, my absence will barely be noticed!

## People

This final paragraph doesn't change much from year to year – but the thanks it contains are genuine and heartfelt. I am immensely grateful to all of you who contribute to the life of our churches – in other words, all of you! I am thankful for those of you with official roles, of course: the Leadership Team, Churchwardens and sidespeople, organists, bell ringers, magazine editors; the PCC and DCC members, lay vice chairs, secretaries and treasurers; the safeguarding officer, pastoral visitors and prescription deliverers; those who tidy, clean and polish, arrange flowers, tend churchyards; those who prepare All Age worship, read lessons, lead intercessions and serve as web hosts; those who fulfil all the other tasks which I may overlook. But also every single one of you who, by your presence, your faithfulness, your prayers enrich the life of the church on Alston Moor.

Thank you – and God bless you all.

*Mark Nash-Williams*

*8<sup>th</sup> May 2024*