

Rob's Vicar's report to the Venta Group APCMs

Sunday 30th April 2017

Lots of you probably know the joke – I suppose, or the story, or whatever – about the conversation between two strangers – a conversation, I think, which could easily have happened in Norfolk – where the one says to the other, “Do you know how to get to... Yarmouth?” “Well”, comes the reply. “I wouldn't have started from here.”

It is always tempting, as a leader, to look around and to think, “I wouldn't have started from here.” But we never have the luxury of an ideal world or infinite resources or wishful thinking. We – you and I – are *here*, and here is where we have each other, and we have the grace of God. And that is absolutely enough.

If you have read the annual report you will see that I have written again about the captivating passage in 1 Samuel 7, where he recognises how much God has helped him and his people. You might have been unfortunate enough to get me into conversation before about stones in the bible, and barely got away, so apologies if that is you. But please bear with me, as I draw out some thoughts which I think will help us to reflect on where we *are*, rather than where we might like to be, and where we might go from here.

First of all, I want to talk about Samuel's statement as he plants a stone in the ground: "thus far, the Lord has helped us." The stone, some of you will have noticed, is called 'Ebenezer' in Hebrew. There are other places in the bible called "Stone of something", in the same way there are lots of different Stokes around, I suppose, but interestingly there is another Ebenezer just a little earlier in the story – 1 Samuel 4 and 5. In that first place, which seemed to have been known as Ebenezer for some time, the Israelites are routed by the Philistines. 30,000 Israelite soldiers lose their lives; the two sons of Eli, the priest, the foremost religious leader in Israel, are killed. Worst of all, the ark of the covenant, the sign, guarantee, and even the reality of God's presence, is stolen away. You and I live under the promise of Jesus, read to us again just now, that God is with us *always*. No-one can ever honestly tell us anything different. But for them, God had gone. Not even just that he had gone, but that someone else had taken him. Do you remember the words of Mary on Easter Day when she couldn't find Jesus's body, and didn't realise the resurrection had happened? "They have taken my Lord away, and I don't know where they have put him." It is that degree of desolation which they experience.

And all of that in a place which is called, "Thus far God has helped us." You and I might want to ask the question, "Really? How?" How had

God helped them? By not allowing the Philistines to kill 35,000 instead of 30,000? How had God helped them?

I use this incident to make a point by exaggeration, I suppose. I want to recognise with you that there are times in the life of our church when we look around and ask questions of that kind. For the most part I don't feel that way at all at the moment – I am much more positive than that. I am very glad that we are starting here, to go back to my joke from the beginning. But because I am human, some days I do. And you might too.

I also want to recognise that all of us have struggles in our personal lives, or amongst our families and friends, which may make us think that God is not with us, or cause us to ask the questions of “Really?” and “How?” This is somewhere, again, where I have been, and so I want to acknowledge that feeling, and appreciate the difficulties some of us are having, or have had in the last year or more, and the way that can make us feel about God.

If you are in the place we have all been from time to time, of looking around the church and its people and wondering why on earth we have to start from here, or of struggling with the difficulty of your circumstances, then I want to invite you to ask the question, even there, of how God has helped you. Because that place, where God was apparently entirely absent, was for some reason called Ebenezer too.

Moving forward to the second Ebenezer story, in 1 Samuel 7, the name is the same, but the picture has changed profoundly, and perhaps the place too. Here a great defeat has been reversed, and God has won an extraordinary victory. This time, the Philistines are the ones who are subdued, and the Scripture says that “they did not invade Israelite territory again.” This was the beginning of a period of God driving back the influence of the Philistines, and of peace between Israel and the Amorites. And so Samuel places a stone named Ebenezer in the ground, saying, “Thus far has the Lord helped us.”

I want to pause for a minute and reflect with you on all that has happened in the last year, and some of the many, many ways that God has helped us...

I have a little list which you will have seen if you have read my report, but I think it is worth restating below some of the encouragements which I have seen this year.

God has helped us so much this year. The biggest move forward we have seen has been in renewing our vision for 2016 and beyond inspired by the Diocesan model, *Committed to Growth*. For me this began with a period of reflection last January, where I made room in my diary by inviting different people to come and preach for us on prayer, and spent a week reading, reflecting and praying by myself, and then another fortnight where I listened to many of you share

your stories of being in the churches here, and your hopes for the future. This gathered shape between Easter and the summer, and in July we had a fantastic joint PCCs away day, where we began work on a vision statement which settled down through the rest of the summer into the three key areas of Creating Community, Deepening Discipleship, and Encouraging Evangelism. It has been lovely to meet with members of the PCCs to explore each of these strands of our life together, and to find ways forward.

In the course of the year there have been some very special occasions which have encouraged us along the way. The Queen's 90th birthday was marked around the villages with different events, from the Queen's Cream Tea at Caistor to the tea parties in Annie and Stan's garden in Arminghall, and at the school in Stoke. At Easter we held another very busy Good Friday family afternoon, and there was a jolly evening in the hall for the Last Night of the Proms. In Arminghall there were 2 splendid informal dinners for Harvest and Christmas, which we look forward to repeating some time soon, and the ever popular St George's Day bellringing. Caistor cream teas came along in the summer and were a great success again, thanks to hard work from an enormous team of people. A very successful charity concert was held at Caistor just before Christmas. We continue our connection with families through our work with the school and more besides, like the Light Party on 31st October; Year 2 from Stoke school visited church

in the autumn. A Songs of Praise service was held in Arminghall in the summer. The St George's Dementia support group now meets fortnightly. We were glad to welcome everyone to the Vicarage once again for our summer barbecue. Christmas with its dinners, services and tea parties was a lovely success this year, buoyed by the prayer meetings in the weeks running up to this special time.

As for the nuts and bolts, we welcomed the Archdeacon for one of his regular visits in May; he encouraged us in Arminghall to think about the mustard seed—a great place to do it, not least because of our plans for the building there which are really gathering more momentum now, working with Geoff Freeman from the diocese. At Stoke we were excited to launch a new family service in the Autumn, Sunday 4 Everyone, welcoming new people to the Church Hall. The second Sunday service at Caistor also took on a new and improved format, becoming Praise and Worship in 2016.

I hope that there is a lot to encourage you there, as there is much to encourage me. My APCM report was about 2016, so there is nothing in there about the Alpha course, which has been running at the Vicarage – 2 little groups, in fact – throughout last term, or of the coffee morning at Caistor, which will provide great opportunities to welcome new people into the building, and more than that, to share faith with them. Both of these things are a real fruit of our desire to do more in the way of evangelism across the churches. Alpha has

been going brilliantly.

I want to finish with one more reflection on the words of Samuel as he plants the stone. Thus far, he says. Thus far God has helped us. It presupposes two things; that there is further to go and, hopefully, that God will help us in the going further too. If you look in your bible you will see that there is a lot more of Samuel's story still to come, and a lot more of the scriptures still to come. A lot more to be done, a lot more helping for God to do. It leads me to suppose that here, too, in our churches, there is a lot more to do, and I have been looking at our CDE vision once again to give me a framework for that.

On the C for Creating Community front it is my earnest prayer that this next year is one where we see real steps forward in connecting the life of the church together more and more strongly with the communities we serve. In Arminghall we have a great opportunity to do that through our building project, aiming to make the physical church building the centre of the village once again. In Stoke, and Dunston, and Caistor, we as God's people need to connect with the rest of the people again. Our recent community survey has yielded comparatively few results, but they are somewhere to begin, and we really must begin somewhere – soon.

The Deepening Discipleship group have worked really hard with me to focus in on the challenge of moving us forward in our love for the bible and in prayer – some of our teaching on Sundays so far this year,

as well as our excellent Lent course, have helped us with that. But we want to go further, and deeper, not least because by the end of the course so many of you were still saying that you were not making any meaningful engagement with the Scriptures day by day. Thinking back to Bishop Graham's visit in January, we will be connecting prayer and the Scriptures by launching a series of Sunday morning teaching on the book of Psalms, starting at in the middle of June, the week after Trinity Sunday, and going through into the autumn. With this will come material for small groups and individuals to work with in the next year. I want to create an opportunity for more and more people to be involved in a group like this, so I would like to see 3 more groups of different kinds born in the next year, and hope that we can have that process all started by the summer. When we begin looking at the Psalms, I will be asking the existing home group leaders to make space for anyone who would like to come and join in with them to find out more. On the discipleship front I am excited with you all about Lyn's ordination – 2 months now!

Home groups should be places for evangelism, for mission in the broadest sense, and so I will be asking the groups to think through the rest of this year about ways in which they can be furthering their connection with our mission in the villages around us; and to work really hard to make sure they are places where anyone is welcome to drop in who is not only new to being in a home group, but perhaps

exploring faith for the first time, and who feels that a small group is a better place to begin. I am delighted at the birth of the Caistor Coffee morning, partly off the back of the E group thinking together about sharing faith, but I know there is a lot more to do about evangelism, not least because so many of us still find this idea so difficult. The Archbishop of Canterbury has just produced some really good material through the Thy Kingdom Come website which we may find helpful in taking things forward. The last word on evangelism today is one I have said many times, and which is so helpful. Let's not think about all of us adding a certain number of people to our churches; let's reflect instead that if all of us reach one person, there will be twice as many as there are now. It is very simple maths, and very attractive! Some of us might reach many: each of us can reach one.

A word on Thy Kingdom Come, because it gets us toward the end of our thinking together this morning. In 1 Samuel 7, the Israelites plead with him in the heat of battle: "Do not stop crying out to God for us, that he may rescue us from the hand of the Philistines." The help is a consequence of the crying out. I have written to the wardens and PCCs to ask them to help me, by setting aside space and time in the churches at the end of next month to pray together that God's kingdom would come, and people would come to know Jesus.

Folllowing on from that burst of concerted prayer, I want to ask you all from all the churches to find a space each month where we can do

that, in a church building or home, and pray together *somehow*, so that not just once a month at the House of Prayer but every week somewhere in our group we will be meeting to pray. We must do this this year. We do it because all of what we are striving for is first and foremost the work of the Holy Spirit, and by praying we join in with what he is doing.

We pray because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead, and that changes everything. We pray because the stone that shows how God helps us is not the one that Samuel planted in the ground, but the one which was rolled away from the tomb. We pray not because our Lord has been taken away, and we do not know where they have put him, but because he promises to be with us always, until he comes again. Let us say, thus far, God *has* helped us, and as we say *thus far*, let us pray. Amen.