

Rectors Remarks Astwick Vale 2015-2016

As I look back over the past year, it has had its ups and downs and like the curate's egg been good in parts. So I would like to thank God for the good things and ask him to help in the hard times.

It has been a joy and pleasure to help see revd Shemil Mathew grow over this past year and become more confident as a priest serving and leading God's people. Shemil has worked all around the benefice and has tried this past year to establish a midweek Sunday School at Farthinghoe among other benefice duties. We have held another successful Benefice summer holiday club at All Saints School Croughton, and my grateful thanks to Mrs Helen Goulder for allowing us to use the school. The week ended with a wonderful celebration in church on the Sunday following. My thanks to all the leaders, helpers, cake makers etc who make it all possible.

As a benefice we have enjoyed much mutual support and encouragement at our monthly services. These take place in rotation around the five villages and are a wonderful opportunity to worship God with others in a new and exciting places. Our worship together this year has been enhanced by the voices of the BFC (Benefice Festival Chorus also known unofficially as the Big Friendly Choir). This has included a special Advent service and on Palm Sunday and during Holy Week. My thanks to David Johnston for his help and encouragement with this.

I am very grateful for all who help and support the work of the church, with their time and support. I am very pleased that this past year we have been able to meet all our expenses due to peoples generous financial support and had work fund raising. However each year costs go up to run the church and it now costs over £1000 a month to run our churches. To meet the rising costs our churches have held an internal stewardship campaign this past year. I am not sure yet what the results of this are, but I hope the church members will set an example in their financial giving, so that we gain the maximum benefit from the current TAX reclaim allowance available to us. Then we will be in a good position to ask others in our communities to help support in this way, knowing we are not asking them to do anything we are not already doing ourselves.

This Easter we had the joy and pleasure of sharing the experience of Easter with the children from All Saints Croughton school, as they come into church during Holy Week and through a variety of activities got a hands on telling of the Easter Story. If you didn't pop into church when it was open you missed something very exciting.

Also this year we have had some very exciting and stimulating discussions in our two Bible Study series. We have looked at how the Ten Commandments affect our lives and also how our creeds or statements of belief also affect the way we live and respond to life's challenges.

All our churches are keen to grow in number, spirituality and support. This desire has been formulated into short documents called GAP's (Growth Action Plans). We hope that during 2016 we will be able to achieve many of the plans our PCCs have put together.

We have also been busy in maintaining the building for worship and have spent about £150,000 this past year, much of this has been from grants and other funding and my thanks to all who have helped raise the money and oversee the projects. At Hinton we have done a lot of window repairs, at Croughton we have replaced the chancel and nave roofs, at Aynho we are in the middle of some window repairs and at Evenley we are just embarking on installing a new toilet in the tower with many thanks to John for his work on this project.

This year we have supported many charities through our giving, and I am very grateful for all who have particularly helped to support 'Seth's Children's Home' an orphanage in Kenya that I visited with my family last year. This orphanage cares for about 30 children, giving them security, food, clothing and an education. One great initiative for this has been the Friday Soups at Croughton. Thanks to Jane, Richard and all who have helped my making soups. Farthinghoe Church now has a regular Friday Cuppa and Chat drop in where the coffee, tea and cakes are good and the chat is free.

Around our churches we have lost a few well known and long standing members which have hit our communities hard, but we have also had the pleasure of some new faces coming to join us, often as a result of a move into the area.

For me I am surprised how quickly time has flown as I am reminded that I have now been your rector for nearly 4 years. Although I have no plans to leave at the moment we must acknowledge that Shemil will finish his training next year and then be off to pastures new.

For me 2015 has had some sad times with the death of my father and our dog Gem being put to sleep. But through these I am more convinced than ever that God's love is for all people, those with faith and those with none. For at these critical moments in our lives we find how our faith helps us. I am pleased to be serving this year as an Honorary Chaplin for the USAF base and as the Rural Dean for the Brackley Deanery.

I have been constantly encouraged by those who join Shemil and I each day at Morning Prayer, encouraging us as we pray for the parishes and their people. For the 50 people who shared our Maundy Communion meal, for those who join, play and sing at our Taize worship and many others besides.

I would like to thank all church members who have worked hard this past year in growing their faith, helping in the life of the church, caring for the church building, helping our worship, doing all the quiet jobs in the background and so helped in any way to bring God's Kingdom a step closer. I pray that this coming year we will continue to help, support and encourage one another in our worship, prayer and witness to God's unfailing love in this world.

God Bless you all

Simon