

SCRIPTURE FOR 2018

Psalm 112 – Happy are the people who love the Lord!

Happy is the person who honours the Lord, who takes pleasure in obeying His commands.

Light shines in the darkness for those who are merciful, kind and just. Happy is the person who is generous. A good person will never fail; they will always be remembered, whose faith is strong and trust in the Lord. They who give generously to the needy and whose kindness never fails; they will be upheld by the Lord!

Wow! Another year has shot past in a flurry of activity across our five parishes wherein people of all faiths and none have been welcomed to share the sacramental and pastoral life offered out by our worshipping community through the living water Jesus offers us. Blessings on each and every one of you for making such a warm welcome in Christ's name possible!!!

In each parish, service numbers are up, and even though they do not worship weekly, people are regularly engaging with the values of Christianity and welcoming the many opportunities we offer out; inviting the wider community to be part of the worship by which they long to be fed. Because of a national shift in the patterns and frequency of worship, mere statistics do not always give us a true picture of the growing numbers and diversity of worshippers we now have. But they *are* coming!

We have been blessed by a buoyant number of weddings and baptisms, and sadly by a great number of funerals of dearly loved friends. These occasional services are a God-given opportunity for us to reach out to the hundreds of people who attend them, meeting them where they are and helping them to meet Jesus as we show them the way to the Gospel truths we profess. As I said in my Annual Report last year, this is slow, often painstaking work, but *it is* bearing fruit. Our congregations are growing as a result of people having been touched by our love and generosity of spirit towards them.

Revd David Mapes left The Downs Benefice at Easter. We are talking with Winchester Diocese about a replacement House for Duty priest. Naturally, the significant burden of services has fallen to me in this past year, but my heartfelt thanks go to Ministry Team colleagues, lay and ordained, who have supported me, ensuring that our services are maintained. My thanks also to each of you, the congregation, who support us faithfully through PCC and myriad other responsibilities which contribute to the smooth running of our sacramental and family-friendly services, together with the many other diverse and fabulously generous ways in which we give glory to God. Summer Fetes, Christmas Fayres, Harvest Festivals, Pet Services, Scarecrow Competitions, Flower Festivals, Northwood Park Benefice BBQ, Choral Concerts, Living Advent Calendar Doors, Lent Course, Faith in the Arts lectures, Peace and Wholeness, Wherwell's series of Meditations, Airborne, REME and All Souls Remembrance services and many other meals and gatherings form the rich soil of our Christian fellowship throughout the year and extend a joy-filled, welcoming heart of Christ to all who seek Him.

Not having an Assistant Priest this year has kept me from developing a number of plans to encourage growth in our parishes. Nonetheless, with your support and encouragement we have still achieved a huge amount! We have broadened the provision of family-friendly services in Wherwell and Chilbolton, offering a short, tailored worship liturgy, along with crèche space and activities for the very young. St Catherine's at Littleton has recently opened up a resourced space for children to play during services, and has developed a firm following at Café Church: offering well thought-out themed worship in the comfort of the Church Room, replete with a yummy selection of home-made cakes! We have begun a fabulous joint worship initiative with Sparsholt Primary School, in which, to the delight of the congregation, school children take over a 10am Welcome Worship service space at St Stephen's Church, leading worship twice a term! It is my hope that such services could roll out to the other parishes in Sparsholt School's catchment in 2018. Across the parishes of Crawley, Littleton and

Sparsholt, Messy Church services continue to flourish, and the faith of those (of all ages) attending are deepening in relationship with Jesus as a result of the accessible and fun combination of scripture, craft, worship and food. Lively and engaged Christian witness to our children and to the wider community has evidenced many baptisms and even a wedding or two birthed in this missional work. Next year, we have a cohort of people going forward for Confirmation: faith flourishing in rich soil!

Through Norman de la Mouette's inspirational ministry, we have seen the growth in attendance at our mid-week Holy Communion service at St Catherine's (9.30am on the first and third Wednesdays of each month) from all corners of the benefice. Likewise, our 8am BCP Eucharist and Evensong church and Fireside Praise congregations are growing in number. I marvel at the near carnival atmosphere in some parishes even on the coldest of winter days. Where once two or three were gathered, now a good number of individuals and couples (especially prospective wedding couples) are enjoying the opportunity to begin their Sunday in prayer rooted in Thomas Cranmer's much-loved poetic liturgy, which is as spiritually relevant in our modern world as it was in 1662.

As a deanery, we have been applauded by diocese for meeting our Common Mission Fund commitments, and I know that behind these statistics, again, there is a hidden story of great sacrifice and sheer hard work in fundraising across the year to ensure The Downs Benefice is able to meet the payments. Thank you so much to treasurers and fundraisers alike for working so hard to achieve this.

As a result of our commitment to the global church programme, *'Thy Kingdom Come,'* which encourages people to pray together for more people to come to know Jesus Christ, we have run a successful discipleship programme, *'The Pilgrim course.'* We have developed the Parish Visitor Scheme across the Benefice, training and equipping many people to be the heart of Christ in pastoral care. We have also been blessed to support three candidates on the Diocese of Winchester's BCM training programme, (Bishop's Commission for Mission) which has been developed to support the work of parishes and deaneries by equipping lay people for service. As a result, Gaynor Childs, Sally Wesley and Alastair Barron have begun to offer themselves as pastoral and lay-worship leaders, sharing the love of Christ with those around them as they exercise their ministry.

My role as your servant-leader, rooted in the foundation of the holy Trinity, is to continue encouraging people to be the best they can be, serving God to the fullness of the gifts and skills they have been blessed with in and through the Holy Spirit. As a community before God, we are journeying inwards, deepening our relationship with Jesus, journeying outwards, sharing that love of Christ with others thirsting to drink, and we are growing in grace: a happy people who love and serve the Lord.

The message is clear. People are coming! We must continue to welcome them and be where they are. May Psalm 112 be the prophetic wisdom for the year ahead: *They who give generously to the needy and whose kindness never fails; they will be upheld by the Lord!* If, God willing, we make it through the current snow blizzards which are falling as I write, my family and I very much look forward to a glorious 2018 with you all, working to prosper God's kingdom and spreading the Good News of Christ's redeeming love to all.

Yours in Christ,

Jax

Revd Jax Machin

Rector, The Downs Benefice

1st March 2018