

LEAVING PREACH F+H – 24/3/19 10.30 CC

TEXT: Luke 1: 26-38

Prayer

“Are you sitting comfortably, then I’ll begin”! Please allow me a little bit longer this morning so do get comfortable – that sounds ominous doesn’t it! As well as quoting ‘Listen with Mother’ just now, after a decade with you of quoting different theologians and scholars in sermons, it’s probably going to sound strange to you that my final words as your Rector here will involve quoting the rock bands ‘Talking Heads’ and ‘The Clash’, the late TV and Radio Broadcaster Sir Terry Wogan and DJ and raver ‘Fatboy Slim’!!

Firstly, we processed in to the music of ‘Talking Heads’ for a reason – the song entitled ‘Once in a Lifetime’ was a favourite tune from my youth that encourages us to question our existence and explore life’s big questions, otherwise life may simply pass you by and we can all let things happen to us rather than us being the driving force of our lives. Or from a Christian point of view, letting God be our driving force with decision making. It has been an honour and privilege to spend a decade with you, questioning, exploring and searching our meaning here in rural north west kent. And just because I am going that doesn’t mean those things stop. I also love this song by Talking Heads though because it has the lyric, “And you may ask yourself, how did I get **here**”!?! November 2008 standing in front of Bishop Michael and

many of you here today, I was licensed as your new Rector and I really felt like saying, “gosh, how did I get here”!! Suddenly my vocational journey, theological training and curacy all felt very short as I was being called to lead a parish for the first time. And now, standing here, a decade suddenly feels very short and again, I feel like crying out, “how did I get here”! I am sure we all have those moments and we are not quite sure how we have reached somewhere in life – that song started with the lyric, “and you may **find** yourself” – and my family and I now **find** ourselves bidding farewell today. I wanted things to come full circle. My licensing with you was in this building and therefore it seemed a natural place for this farewell. But please remember it is just a farewell as your Rector. My family and I have made such wonderful friendships here and leaving a parish is one of the hardest parts of any clergy’s vocation. So please do come and visit in Gravesend – we are not going far. But not on Sunday mornings – stay loyal to your Church here in RNWK!

I bring things full circle as well by taking many of you back to my very first Sunday within the Parish. Advent Sunday 2008 – my first experience of getting to all 3 buildings in F+H in one day. And as a gift to you, as you arrived in Church – intrigued who this new person was I am sure – I gave you each a card with these words on, the words behind me on the screen. And it’s been lovely, as I have done visits to many of your homes over the years, I have seen this card stuck to a

noticeboard, fridge or door. These are the words and actions of the eucharistic feast which we will share together shortly. “You are to be taken, blessed, broken, distributed so that the work of the incarnation may go forward”. The biggest privilege I have had as your Rector, and believe me there have been many, is that each week for ten years is to take bread and wine, bless them, break the bread and distribute to each one of you, so that each week you may feel refreshed, strengthened and renewed to go out and take the work of the incarnation forward. And the reason these cards were a gift to you was because I wanted you to see that our lives mirror the actions of the eucharistic feast. For God takes each one of us – has a plan for all – therefore He needs and does bless us – often that will involve us being and feeling broken, that’s the hard part, and only then can we be distributed to help others. So, for example, my family and I were **taken** to be here 10 years ago, we have felt incredibly **blessed** to be here. Have experienced my own **brokenness** with you all. Not sure, why as a member of clergy I felt I was immune from this part but so many of you here helped me over a couple of difficult patches in my ministry in the last decade – and I will always be grateful for that. And now, my family and I are being **distributed** so that we can try and take the work of the incarnation forward at St George’s, Gravesend. I personally think the answer to the ‘Talking Heads’ song is that ‘you may find yourself’ being called by God. But that involves risk taking, trust and faith. Many people have said to me ‘why do you want to

leave' – but it is not so much what I want but what **God** wants. God continually takes us to new possibilities and challenges even when we might not know exactly what that will involve. It would have been far more comfortable and convenient to stay here for another 10 or 20 years, but God often calls us to somewhere new when life does start to get comfortable. And that means all of us need to put ourselves in that position of vulnerability and trying new ideas. Without clergy coming and going over the years, those changes may never materialise because we all get too comfortable with each other. The last word on the card behind me is '**Forward**'. We know we must keep trying to move forward in life – things can't stay the same forever. It was very apt that my first Sunday with you all was Advent Sunday – a time for hope, anticipation and looking forward. And as my family and I move forward with much hope, anticipation and excitement we also feel the same things for you - that you will all be blessed with new exciting possibilities.

And it seems very apt too that our last Sunday with you is the Annunciation. The story of the announcement of the coming of God made flesh in the person of Jesus. This Feast day has been celebrated since the fourth century and is often known as Lady Day. We'll have a couple of 'Mary' themed hymns during communion. But I thought it was very apt for today as we heard of Mary's obedience, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word". The Old

Testament reading spoke about the Lord giving us 'signs', and in the New Testament reading today we heard the words, 'I have come to do your will'. This last 18 months I have been looking for plenty of 'signs' to see in to the future about whether, in the words of 'The Clash', 'Should I Stay or Should I go'? At the end of the day, none of us can see in to a future about what is best to do. But we are assured that God promises us a future and that He is there to guide us. Again, this is all about trust and faith. So, if anyone thinks why would I want to swap RNWK for Gravesend, it's nothing for you to take personally but in the fact that there have been many signs in the last year that God is calling me out of my comfort zone, and to try something else. And I won't know what will become of this unless I try. I have come to do God's will and therefore 'Here am I, Lord'. We have Mary as the perfect example of obedience and trusting in God, and as she heard so we do too, "Do not be afraid, for you have found favour with God".

Any leaving sermon has the danger of listing lots of achievements as if they are the most important parts of ministry. I like to think there have been many here during my time and some of my highlights have involved the children's work with holiday clubs, Good Friday projects and the forming of Messy Church which this year is 5 years old here. The formation of our RNWK Group has been a massive achievement, so have our links within the community especially at Wellfield and the extension to All Saints' Church was a lot of work at time but has proved

a real blessing to our community. (*and mention Israel) But I am not going to go any further as I will go against what I have just said! Achievements are lovely to mention but I like to think a legacy lies more in the 'being' rather than the 'doing'. 'Being' with people, being alongside them in their joys and sorrows. To think these hands have baptised children, held newly married couples hands together and have also held the hand of those who are unwell and those in need of final prayers before their death. Ministry is wrapped up in all these things and I encourage you to keep 'being' there for each other. And therefore, to be there for each other, **togetherness** is so important. Praying and worshipping **together** within our Group of Churches is our foundation, and so my final encouragement to you is to make sure this still happens. Yes, there will need to be times where every Church in our Group needs to have their own service, but other times it will be very important, like today, that we come together as a Group – to show to others the love of Christ – and therefore surely that is easier to do when we come **together**. In these coming weeks and months, please support my clergy friends and colleagues Dylan, Helen and Elizabeth, the lay ministers who do so much for our Group and our Churchwardens. They will need each one of you, and they will need a sense of togetherness. There will be an exciting vision that lies ahead for RNWK and do pray for whoever takes over from me – God already knows who that person is and we pray He will make it clear to that person. Do pray for this process and our vacancy team here. And

when someone new does start here, one bit of advice to you, the worst possible thing you can say to that person is, 'well you know Jim used to dress up as Buzz Lightyear, Postman Pat, a reindeer onesie amongst other characters'! A new person will arrive with many different gifts and that will be exciting to you all. We are all different and we give thanks to God for that.

If I have one sadness as I leave, it's that I don't leave you in a better way numerically. I've tried my hardest to grow the numbers of this Parish – if only we could have had this number every week – and I know it's not just my responsibility to do so. But each week, I often feel sad that so many people are missing out on the joys of worshipping God and coming together as a Church community. How we get others to share with us is one of the great challenges of being a Christian today and I go back to what I said about the joys of being with people throughout life's special occasions and events. This may not result in regular Church attendance but that sense of hospitality and being there for people is so important. When I sometimes feel, well, I haven't achieved huge growth here, I am reminded of a very wise Churchwarden who I worked alongside here during my time. Infact, all the wardens I have worked alongside here have been very wise! But Bob Kneller, I am very grateful to you that you once said to me, 'never mind growth, well done on simply keeping things going and the people that we do have'. So, in this world of mission action plans,

safeguarding, risk assessments, faculties, policies, pressures of Church finances, dressing up as a gimmick to attract young people amongst other things, ‘folks, do keep things going’. It has for centuries here and I know will continue in the future, and most likely, in a new and different way so that the Church can grow. And that may be one reason we haven’t grown numerically in recent times – we maybe need to be more radical in our thinking and doing. But guaranteed is that God is working His purpose out through us.

Praising God and giving thanks for each precious day we have is a key message of any clergy or minister. So when we process out at the end, we’re going to leave to a very upbeat song by Fatboy Slim (great name!) who sang, “we’ve come a long long way together through the hard times and the good, I have to celebrate you, I have to praise you like I should” – from a Christian perspective the praise is all for God, and I thank Him for my time here and we certainly have come a long long way together over ten years, and in the process we have been taken, blessed, broken and distributed.

So here we are, I find myself in the leaving moment. Why leave now? In the words of the great Sir Terry Wogan, who when he left Radio 2 after many years of broadcasting which he loved doing, he said, “there is never a right time to leave something you love, but there might be a wrong time if you hang on too long”. I therefore thank God that this does feel the right time, leaving RNWK in a good place with an exciting

future ahead, and I thank you for all your love, support and care. Hanging on too long may well make it a wrong time.

Most of all can I thank my beautiful family – Sarah, Joel and Hannah. To think Joel and Hannah were 4 and 1 when we moved here, now look at them! To think I was 21 when we moved here, now going on 60!! Sarah does so much behind the scenes whereas as I get this glory position each week – I couldn't have done this without her. Sarah – thank you. And most of all I couldn't have done this without God. Time to be distributed to Gravesend! Amen.