

Sunday 28 January 2024 – Sue Hammersley says goodbye

The feast of Candlemas is celebrated on 2 February 2024. In this service, Sue Hammersley looks back over her thirteen years of ministry at Saint Mark's. The reading recalls the presentation of the child Jesus at the Temple, which is the focus for Candlemas celebrations. That is also a moment for looking forwards.

Reading:

Luke: 2:22-40.

Sermon: 'Saying Goodbye' – Sue Hammersley

Oh my! I knew that January would go quickly but I find it hard to believe that this really is my last day as the Vicar of St Mark's. Thank you all for coming today. I can see faces from so many different parts of my life and ministry here at St Mark's, it is very humbling and deeply touching.

Today the church remembers the Presentation of Christ in the Temple, or the Feast of Candlemas. It's the last day of the Christmas (or Epiphany) season and the first day of looking forward towards Lent, Holy Week and Easter. It's the day when our focus turns from the crib to the cross. So today lends itself to looking back and looking forward. Endings and new beginnings, for all of us.

As I look back over the last thirteen years it's impossible to pick out highlights without diminishing the experiences I don't mention. But what's life without a risk or two...?! As Associate Vicar, part of my brief was to develop relationship in Broomhall. I met a whole range of people, at the Broomhall Forum, the Broomhall Centre, the Breakfast, youth groups and the Group of Groups. Thank you to everyone who welcomed me into Broomhall and who do such amazing work there. I hope that St Mark's will continue to invest in relationships with the people of Broomhall.

Within the church my focus was, initially, to try and develop our work with children and families. I met with the team of volunteers and picked up that they were tired. My predecessor, Ian Wallis, had taken us to a taster session for Godly Play and several of the volunteers found new life in this way of sharing Bible stories with children, encouraging their imagination and insight. Now look at us... our children are such an important part of our life together, bringing energy and enthusiasm to our community. Thank you to our children and to our parents who risk the chaos of bringing toddlers and crying babies into a quiet space – you are all amazing, and I know that you will continue to make this church an exciting community to be part of!

As Associate Vicar I had time to go into the local schools where I enjoyed taking assemblies, leading carol services and welcoming school visits. As the Vicar my priorities changed, and we appointed a new Associate Vicar! In recent years I became a Governor at King Edwards' over the road. Thank you to everyone whose calling is to serve our schools and Universities. Learning together is such an important part of what it means to be church so thank you to everyone who is involved in the different study and prayer groups at church.

Keeping an open mind is such a vital aspect of our faith and this month's edition of The Messenger, is a wonderful tribute to our Living Thinking Loving Faith. May your curiosity continue to be piqued as you move forward into the unknown future.

I hope that I don't get the reputation of being the Vicar who killed the Broomhill Festival... So much has changed in the nearly 50 years since the Festival began, not least the demographic of the community it serves. I believe that it will have a renaissance, once local groups have found a new angle but, for now, church members continue to play a part in Broomhill life, especially

the Community Library. Our families' worker, Hannah, has made strong links with Broomhill Toddler Group who are now meeting at the Broomhill Methodist Centre. Thank you to everyone who keeps a link with our local neighbourhood, even if it's just by your support of the local coffee shops! Each of us plays a part in witnessing to the good news and we must never underestimate the effect of our integrity within conversations, wherever they take place.

This morning's Gospel reading brings the old and the new together in the lives of the baby Jesus, and Simeon and Anna. Simeon believed that he would meet the Messiah before he died. At 84, Anna was watching and waiting in the Temple every day. How did they recognise that this child was the one who would change everything? They had been waiting for so long that they must have begun to wonder whether they had missed the crucial sign and yet, when Mary and Joseph brought Jesus into the Temple they knew that this was the one. Their wisdom, their patience and their attentiveness to the sacredness of each moment meant that they were able to recognise the work of God and join in.

Simeon and Anna help us to look back without regret and to look forward in hope. This is a time of year for our faith to grow, to draw from the deep traditions which have gone before us, to celebrate the reality of God's presence here and now and to look ahead to new possibilities which we are invited to be part of – however old we may feel!

As I look ahead I have to confess that I do have some plans, I just haven't been able to announce them until today. During my sabbatical I went on retreat to Holy Rood House in Thirsk <http://www.holyroodhouse.org.uk/>. Over the last few months there have been many conversations and it has now been confirmed that I will take over as Executive Director of this small retreat house. It is set in the beautiful countryside of James Herriot's Yorkshire and, in fact, one of the houses which the community owns was the house where the real Mrs Pomfrey (not her name) lived with the real Pekinese (who was not called Tricky Woo!)

This means that Sibylle and I will be leaving Sheffield and she is announcing this to her congregation at St Aidan's today. We will both be licensed to our new roles on May 25. You would be very welcome to come and celebrate this new start with us. Thank you for your company over the last thirteen years and especially these last six months as I have been discerning the way ahead. You have all been so gracious and supportive of me even though I know that it leaves you with a great many questions.

Leaving St Mark's is really sad for me because I have become part of your lives, your joys and your sorrows and you have become part of mine but I truly believe that there are good things ahead for this church. Today, this Candlemas, we can look back at the good things we've done together and we can feel proud. We stand on solid ground and so we can look forward with confidence into the uncertainty, with faith in a God who is always doing something new... Keep up the good work, and remember not to take yourselves too seriously! I'm going to end with some words which Eve Saunders wrote on the occasion of the death of Donald Smith, a dear friend from Broomhill Methodists and which I adapted to remember Peter Fisher. I offer these words today for all of us. Thank you, Eve.

We give thanks for the seeds of love
sown in us from the beginning of time
which we have carefully nurtured
to produce plentiful fruits, fruits of grace,
compassion, hope, humour, enthusiasm
and unshakeable faith in God's love.

We give thanks for the gift of memory
whose threads connect us through life

and will continue to do so through death.
We give thanks for the inestimable gift
of God's love for us
which is offered unconditionally.

We give thanks that this love
is never beyond our human reach;
it is always and everywhere
there for the taking.

We give thanks that when our hearts reach out
in longing and acceptance,
love flows in
bringing us back home
to a place we recognise –
a place of grace and fulfilment
where the peace of God passes all understanding.
We give thanks.

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