

CHRIST CHURCH CLIFTON

An Open Letter from Paul, October 2016

There are many extraordinary privileges of being a church leader – seeing people come to and grow in their faith, seeing individuals and churches transformed, seeing a church family respond to the Lord’s vision for his Kingdom with excitement, commitment and sacrificial giving of their time, money and gifts, and leading a church into a new season of growth – as I believe is happening here at Christ Church.

But there are also times when those in leadership are called to make decisions which cause some church members distress. I am deeply aware that our new Sunday service pattern (from November 6th) is one such decision.

When church leaders make decisions like this we do not do so lightly or with the intent to harm anyone. I realise that this can be very hard for people to understand – especially when a church leader says, ‘I believe the Lord has told me that we need to do this’ – but we do so mindful of the need for a ‘thin’ rather than ‘thick’ skin: almost unbearably painful though it is, I want to feel the cost of my leadership to some of those I seek to serve, and can only offer my heartfelt sorrow that in pursuing the Lord’s leading, I am causing some of you to feel disillusioned and bereaved.

I would like to share with you how the Lord led me to this decision. Over the years I have, on occasions, had the privilege of hearing the Lord speak words of enormous significance for a church family – about vision, church planting, and warnings of danger to the health of the Body. But this is the first time I have sensed the Lord tell me something so clearly and that it is a decision I needed to make alone.

On every other occasion, I have sought to make a decision alongside other leaders. This was the case when, in the Spring, my colleagues and I returned to the challenge of Sunday mornings at Christ Church. As we began to talk and pray, Janet challenged me: ‘Do you believe that the Lord is still saying that we need to move to one main morning service?’ [This was, as many will recall, something I believe the Lord spoke to me before I arrived as vicar in 2010, but which we were not able to agree as a leadership at the time.]

When Janet asked me that question a few months ago, I realised that I could not say ‘Yes.’ Or at least, I could have done, but it would have been a human response rather than a present conviction from the Lord. I needed to ‘follow’ him back into that question, which would take time. So, together, we agreed the trial pattern of morning services which began at the end of July.

Over the months since, the Lord has spoken to me clearly in a number of ways, with various confirming signs – all building to an unshakeable conviction that a change to one main morning service is critical in the Lord’s plans for our future.

Leadership in a church like ours is essentially a partnership between the vicar and four other groups: church wardens, clergy and lay staff, PCC, and key volunteers. I began to inform them in that order, and from each group, after discussion and at times robust questioning, received their support in making what I believe to be not just the right decision but the Lord’s decision. On Saturday the 8th of October, I informed the PCC, genuinely unsure how they would respond, and even more unsure of what I would do if they reacted negatively. It was humbling to hear each member speak, one after the other, in support of my sense that I could do no other than follow the Lord’s guidance.

As I was, unusually, informing them of a decision I had taken, there was no proposal on which they were being asked to vote. However, as a PCC, they themselves decided to propose a motion of support for my decision. The vote in favour was unanimous. As six members of the PCC were not present at that meeting, I contacted them each by phone or email that same day. One must, I think, be away, but the other five all responded with the same affirmation and support as their colleagues.

Finally, those with responsibility for leading the musical and sung worship aspect of our services – Adrian Sawyer, Phil Coomber, and Chris Whitwell – have all assured me of their belief that this is the right decision; and indeed, that it is one for which they have been hoping for some time.

It is impossible in such a situation to detail exactly how the Lord will bless us as a result of this decision – although some of the practical and organisational benefits will be immediately evident. But I do not believe the Lord ever asks for such an act of obedience in order to harm us. He has set before us a vision which, at its heart, calls us to be a people who, individually and corporately, pursue the presence of Jesus – in scripture, this is the promise of the Father, made possible by the work of the Holy Spirit. I believe that we are being called to do this corporately – to be family together, young and old, long-standing member and newcomer.

And of course, this is not about us – it's all for those who do not yet know what it is to experience the presence of Jesus. The church of God is a lifeboat, and this involves cost and sacrifice.

I know that many members of our morning church family are excited about the prospect of joining together for a new Gathering at 10.00am – hundreds united to worship and pursue the presence of One. But I am also very conscious that for some of our members, such as the very elderly, there will be concerns about such a large Gathering.

We are taking this very seriously, and will do everything possible to mitigate those concerns. In particular, we aim to begin the new 10.00 am service with a period of All Age Worship, before our children go down to their groups, at which time coffee will be served. It may be that some people choose to arrive then – please speak to Nelly about lifts and the other practicalities of this. On the other hand, I am also aware that the move to a later time will make it much easier for some of our older members to attend church.

The future is never fully known to any of us, including me. But I know two things: (1) God is good and has the best interests of all our church family members at heart; and (2) no one in leadership wants to see anyone leave as a result of what we discern as obedience to the Lord's call. We want to keep each and every person. If you would find it helpful to talk further with me or one of the team, please do ask.

I know what a church feels like when it is about to experience a new season of growth – this is already happening in so many areas of our church life and I believe with every fibre of my being that this change to our Sunday pattern is crucial to that onward growth and fuller life which is the Lord's will for us. I realise that the proof of that lies in the future – so all I can do at this time is to say how truly sorry I am that some of you are finding this change really hard, whilst at the same time asking you to accept that I must follow what I believe to be the Lord's leading.

However you are feeling in response to my decision, please – come with us on this next stage of the journey of this great church, with an open heart to what the Lord can and will do among and through us. I believe it is going to be extraordinary.

May the Lord bless and inspire us all.

With my love and prayers

Paul