

## Rectors Reflection for All Saints' Annual Church Meeting 2025

*'Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night. That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither – whatever they do prospers.'* (Psalm 1:1-3)

Psalm 1 has long been one of my favourite psalms – and these opening verses in particular have been central to the vision of how I want to live my life: rooted in God's word; flourishing, fruitful – and also resilient. I've always been drawn to the wide open spaces, so the fact that this vision is set by a stream – an oasis, if you will – is also a major reason why this particular vision of the life of faith touches me so deeply.

Last year, in my reflection for the Annual Meeting, I talked about our church facing a fork in the road – a choice of two different paths, of two alternative futures: to stay as we were or to pursue a new path, one of uncertainty but also renewal. I observed that the former was easy (at least in the short term) and the latter was hard. I concluded with the thought that to make that choice, we needed to understand and evaluate who we are.

Over the last year, we've been doing just that. Approved by the church council, a group spent months doing the hard yards, asking this very question: who are we? What is our vision? The drafts, and re-drafts have been taken back and forth to the church council – and finally, I was delighted to be able to launch it with the whole church in January. Our vision – if you don't know it off by heart already! – is this: **an oasis of God's grace and peace.**

One of the things which has struck me about this process is how the 'new path' taps into deep wells which energised the 'old' path. This is not a radical departure (we're not going to 'move fast and break things'!), more an evolution and clarification of things we've known to be true and inspiring for a long time. Ask anyone who loves All Saints – as most of you do – what draws them here and they'll use a combination of the following words: peaceful, beautiful, quiet, rooted, prayerful, calm, timeless, special. Like a tree planted by streams of water... like an oasis.

But an oasis has a purpose. It is a place we long to head for (inviting, nourishing) and it also enables us to go back out into the desert again (refreshing, adventuring).

This vision affirms all that we know to be good about our church already... and also sets a clearer course for us, a path to travel which enables us to live it out. It gives us a set of values, or dimensions, which describe what this kind of oasis looks and feels like. It draws from existing strengths and inspires us to develop new ones. It can expand our horizons without feeling unattainable or guilt-inducing. It also puts God right in the middle (it's the middle word for a reason!), and the great benefits of our good news – grace and peace – as the timeless, biblical foundation.

I hope, when you hear it, you feel that same 'yes!' that the working group did. That sense of excitement that this is who we want to be, and that wanting to be this oasis sounds good!

It also feels timely, for other reasons, too. First, after a somewhat challenging year 2023-24, we've been welcoming more new people into our church community again, over the last 12 months. Our growth is gentle, but real. In other words, our church family is changing anyway. In a rapidly growing city like MK, change is inevitable. The only real choice is between healthy change and unhealthy change. A good vision, rooted in our core strengths, allows us to change healthily and sustainably – to take the fork in the road which is really the only viable long-term option available to us.

Second, our world is changing rapidly; who knows how the next few months will work out, let alone few years? Our rootedness, our presence as an oasis of God's grace and peace, has never been more timely, more valuable, more needed. When Jesus spoke peace to his disciples, he observed: 'I do not give as the world gives.' We are an oasis which holds out the peace 'which passes understanding.' Many thirst for this peace at present.

I'm delighted to see that we are already seeing some of the fruit of where this vision might take us. This year has seen the launch of Children's Choir (and the growth of Children's Church), Ponderings in the Pub, Welcome Events, in-person Choir Practice and a newly trained team of bellringers. Next month will see the long-awaited return of a monthly Café Church, at least for a trial summer season. Zoom Kids and Relax Teens are thriving, as are the Walking for Health coffee mornings, welcoming up to 80 members of the community each time. And our other regular events and ministries – Dorcas, coffee mornings, schools visits, , online exhibitions, fayres and all the lives we touch through baptisms, weddings and funerals – continue. Not to mention our Sunday worship, the heartbeat of our family life. My heartfelt thanks to all of you who contribute in so many ways.

One more vote of thanks: our 'oasis' relies heavily on a team of people who keep it in mint condition – the unsung heroes who do all the unseen jobs. Thank you thank you thank you.

Over the coming months, we'll be exploring our vision together. As we do that, I'm sure the Lord will point us towards new opportunities, as well as reimagined old/existing ones. Whatever happens, it's not the vision that upholds us, it's always God who gives the vision. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. Our task, our vision, is to embody this unchanging Christ in a changing world – and in doing so, to be an oasis of God's grace and peace, for his glory.

*Matt, 19<sup>th</sup> March 2025*