

Hello Everyone, well here we are – Sunday 26th April and my final day as Curate in the Macclesfield Team ministry.

Sue and I had begun planning a final service for this afternoon. We had all sorts of ideas for a short, informal service involving people from all four churches. It was going to be another example of “Worship with Welly” – the church would have been filled with all your smiling faces, your laughter, your joy and your singing. Friends from my old workplace and my old church were going to come along – this was going to be the last of many memorable and always emotional services during my curacy at Macclesfield.

Unfortunately, the coronavirus and the lockdown mean we can't have this kind of service *today*. But many of you have been in touch with me (and with Sue). You've all said how sad it is that we can't have the 'leaving service' we were planning and you were expecting. And I completely agree, on a purely selfish note – I'd much rather be looking at your smiling faces today rather looking at a camera lens.

For me, it's important that we **all** have the chance to take part in some kind of service (not just those who are online). I want us **all** to be together, I want us **all** to be seeing the smiles and joy in each other's faces, I want us **all** to be experiencing that communal and common bond of love and fellowship that unites us and sustains us as children of God. So, we will have some kind of 'celebration service' or something at some time in the future. We don't know how it will happen or when it will be, but I pray that God will reveal to us the means and the opportunity to do it. But will you please pray too? Will you keep thinking about it, asking about it and encouraging (if necessary, **nagging**) Sue, Martin, Andy and me in how we can make it happen.

In the meantime, I still want to give the homily I'd planned for today. This is one of my favourite passages that has sustained and comforted me over the years. When I started the Alpha course (back in 2007) my old vicar gave me this bible and you can see it's got lots of colourful sticky tabs. These represent some of *my* milestones, *my* landmarks in *my* journey in faith. As I read the bible, the Word of God, I discovered passages that touched and resonated with me – so I'd add another sticky tab to mark it.

This Philippians passage is one of the first I marked with a sticky tab back in 2007-2008.

This Philippians passage was one of the bible readings at my licensing as a Reader in 2013. And I was asked to give this reading at the service in Chester cathedral – another memorable day and landmark in my journey to ordination (but I didn't know that at the time).

This Philippians passage played an important but very personal part at my ordination as a deacon (in 2017), a year later in my priesting, and in all the weddings and baptisms I've taken. But most people wouldn't know it and I want to explain why today.

There's a lot packed into this Philippians passage that challenges us, reassures us and inspires us. But there are **six words** in this passage that live with me and carry me through times of struggle, through times of desperation and self-doubt. When I'm confronted with a tough situation or a difficult decision, when I ask myself and when I pray to God and ask him 'what do you want me to do?' He usually answers clearly and loudly with those same **six words**...

"SHINE LIKE STARS IN THE UNIVERSE"

These six words are so important in my life and my faith, they're embroidered on my white stole specially made for my ordinations as deacon and priest. They are the six words I read whenever I put on this stole. They are the **six words** I want to leave with you today, because in one way or another, we are all going through times of struggle at the moment, and that most definitely includes me! But I take comfort and strength in these **six words**

God doesn't call us to be superhuman, to be perfect or to be faultless in our own strength. God made us, formed us, created us just as we are, with all our weaknesses, quirks and faults. But in these **six words**:

- we are called to **shine** through *God's* strength and *God's* grace – not our own!
- We are called to be like **stars** sparkling and glistening in the darkness. We are to bravely and obediently radiate and reflect the light and love of Christ – not our own!
- We are called to be those shining stars in the whole **universe**. That light and love of Christ has to reach out far and wide to the whole of creation and society. Just like the star that heralded Christ's birth in our world, that guided the wise men and the shepherds, we are to be examples and beacons of God's light and love – not our own!

So, the next time you're confronted by challenge, when life feels like a struggle, when you are torn apart by indecision or filled with self-doubt – then:

- Join the club! Because I'll be having similar struggles too!
- Join me in putting a sticky tab in your bible at this Philippians passage.
- Join me in simply but bravely and obediently living out those six words to ...

"SHINE LIKE STARS IN THE UNIVERSE"

God Bless and Amen.

Karen

