

So here we are, after nearly 14 years of being Vicar of Cudham and Downe, today's my last service here with you all. I'll soon be moving on to be interim change minister in the diocese of Durham – if you don't know what that means, in a sense neither do I, as it's a new post designed to help struggling parishes manage change – I would value your prayers as I settle in this new job. I did wonder this week whether I should return instead to my old career in IT support for the NHS – software issues like those experienced over the last few days would never have happened in my time, though I did belong to the generation of programmers who put in the millennium bug!

I did wonder what passage to choose this morning – should it simply be John the Baptist's call 'repent, for the kingdom of God is near' – while that's always necessary, maybe not today. Or reflecting on the special services and work in schools the passage from Amos 5 "I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are offensive to me' – certainly not, I've enjoyed them all, and what about the passage from Genesis 22:5 which apparently was quoted when the London College of Divinity because St John's College Nottingham – it's a passage about some moving and some not – stay here with the ass, while we go elsewhere – not sure that's totally appropriate either! No, I felt the Lord was asking me to preach on the passage we had read, which amazingly also featured in collective worship at Cudham school this week – I've had lovely presents from both schools – including one in a book produced by the children which has an award cup with the words 'top vicar' on it – I'm not sure about that but this week has already been an emotional week – it has been a privilege and a joy to serve as your vicar, and so I'd like to reflect on that passage from Philippians 1:3-11 as I prepare to say goodbye.

Verse 3: "Paul begins I thank my God every time I remember you."

Remembering is a great gift - I must confess, there are so many memories here that bring a smile to my face. Those Donkey processions for Palm Sunday, St Francis Day services at Christmas Tree farm – Christmas Tree Festivals, and through the difficult days of covid, how services continued online, with Helen and me doing our Richard and Judy double act live streaming from our dining table. The times we've spent in prayer, and the many weddings, baptisms and funerals that you've invited me to share in—these moments will forever make me thank God for these wonderful congregations.

Verse 4: "In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy."

My prayers for you have always been joyful, not just because of your unwavering faith, but because church is meant to be joyful. I have to say, it's not always felt like that, and long running PCC meetings are not something I'm going to miss. Paul goes on in his letter to the church in Philippi to challenge ungodly behaviour – have a look when you get home. But the way that God has been faithful to us, here at Cudham and Downe despite the challenges. I was looking back on electoral rolls from when I arrived. They are almost exactly the same size then as now. Lots of people have moved away, or gone to be with the Lord – so our church fellowship remains the same, but with a sense of new people coming to faith – I pray with joy remembering the confirmation services, the commission of the pastoral group, the Sunday club Christmas performances – especially the one for Christmas 2020 when everything moved online again.

Verse 5: "Because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now."

From day one, we have been partners in spreading the good news of Jesus. Whether it was through our services designed for newcomers, our discussions in Bible study and home groups, or simply sharing a cup of tea and a chat, your commitment has been inspiring. Please keep this commitment to partnership alive during whatever God is calling you to next. It's a partnership based in the good news of Jesus, not our own personal take on how church should or should not be.

Verse 6: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."

Just remember, God's work isn't done yet – one feature of the Christian life that's been at the heart of what's important to me is Christian discipleship – encouraging you all to see what God is calling you to do. Whether that's as churchwarden, pastoral team member, reading or praying in church, cleaning, singing, bellringing – God has a calling for each of us by his Spirit. And there's the buildings too – God has begun, I believe, something special as both PCC's are considering how best the church buildings can serve the mission of God - both to those who worship regularly and so they can be flexible to reach others. Yes, in all these things God has begun a good work in you – it's been great to see you grow in your discipleship, and the spiritual life is what led to daily prayer on zoom during covid as well as in church – I wonder where God might be calling you to pray next?

Verse 7: "It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart."

One of the features of many churches, St Mary's Downe included is to have a list of previous vicars displayed. In my last church this was on a pillar – my name is written in stone! Yes, I'm moving on, but I will continue to have you in my heart – your support, practical and spiritual has made my time here special. Have each other in your hearts and see how you can support each other to take these churches on to the next chapter of your shared life.

Verse 8: "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus."

While I may be moving on, I will always long for this congregation with deep affection. The way many of you support each other in quiet ways in times of need, and as we saw during covid and still continue through Christmas and Easter gift bags your genuine care for the other is truly Christ-like.

Verses 9-11: "And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."

My prayer for you is that your love continues to grow. Keep asking questions, keep seeking wisdom, and above all, keep loving each other. It's in shared moments of joy and discovery that we truly find God's love. Remember, the church may have four walls, but it's people that make or break a church. I've reflected elsewhere on what I recently heard the now retired bishop of Durham say – it's not bishops that close churches, but congregations. There are going to be challenges ahead – but seek the kingdom of God, encourage others to join in fellowship, reach out with the love of Christ into our community and into our schools.

My last month here at Cudham and Downe in some ways has been nothing exceptional – it's included a baptism, a funeral and two burial of ashes services, two 25th wedding anniversary blessings, lots of school services, taking communion to the housebound, prayer meetings and bible studies, marriage and confirmation preparation, seeing my spiritual director and other clergy, various meetings, social occasions as well as Sunday and weekday services – and it's still only the 21st! No wonder I need a rest. Some of these things I've done on my own, most have involved Helen and others of you working alongside me, and for that I am so grateful. Never let anyone – and I include bishops and archdeacons in this – tell you that small-church rural ministry is easy! As I step into this new chapter of my journey as Helen and I move to Durham, I carry with me the love, laughter, and lessons we've shared. Thank you for the memories, the support, and the joy you've brought into my life. May God's grace continue to guide you, and may your hearts always be filled with joy and laughter. Later on in the service I'll share bread and wine with you, and pray God's blessing on you (individually). It's been a privilege to share in this ministry - I end where I started at the beginning of our reading 'I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy'. Let's pray now.