

# Vision Evening

Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> February 2024

What to expect tonight?

Who am I?

Where are we?

Where do we need to go?

What do we need to get there?

SONG [Open the eyes of My heart](#)

## Who am I?

A little bit about me, for those that don't know...I was born to a Christian family in York. I came to faith on a Pathfinders holiday in Wales in the mid 90s. I studied drama down in Winchester and started my working life in journalism before becoming a children's worker at a church in Middlesbrough. I married Emma in 2006 and around the same time felt a calling to ministry but we decided it wasn't for us at that time, we had Belle and Jasmine, and then I became a primary school teacher. In 2017, Archbishop Sentamu had a conversation with me and we decided to pursue this calling to ministry. We moved up to Durham where I studied at Cranmer Hall, and then we moved on to Bridlington where I served my curacy in a different context – one church, modern building, urban, coastal ministry in a deprived area. And while we were there in Bridlington, Zoey came along. When we were looking for our next steps in ministry, we felt drawn to the North-east. We'd enjoyed our time in Durham and looked for the opportunity to return. We didn't think it would be as far north as it is!

So what attracted us to this set of parishes? On the face of it, I must be honest, I didn't even look at the parish profile. It seemed like three different jobs rolled into one, and I couldn't quite make it out. But the Archdeacon suggested we look into it, and we put in a late application, and were invited to interview. I think it was the interview day itself that made us feel like this could be the place for us. Ken Scurfield took us around on a freezing but crisp winter's morning. And we saw these beautiful country churches in this beautiful Northumbrian landscape. We sensed God's presence and the warmth of the people in each. And each church seemed so different, which I have to say was an appeal to me. The family were keen for a move into the country, and the variety of churches, from traditional to more contemporary, were attractive. For me, Felton offered something quite unique. I was brought up in a church setting more similar to Felton than Longframlington or Whittingham. I could see the role the church played in the community, its heart for reaching people of all generations with God's love, and with people coming from a range of Christian traditions who were keen to explore more progressive forms of worship. Another thing that had initially made me willing to look so far north was the attraction of the Northern Saints and Celtic spirituality, which I had done a lot with in my curacy. There seemed to me so much 'space' to meet with God. It seemed that these set of parishes ticked all of those boxes, so we accepted the role, and here we are! But this was three parishes wrapped up in one job, not three jobs wrapped up in one parish...so I thought it would be helpful, a year in, to look at these in a bit more detail...

## Where are we?

As you know, there are three parishes which I oversee, and this is what I've gathered about each of them in my first year – often the things that Parish profiles don't tell! Let's start with the furthest away...

Whittingham is about thirteen miles north-west of Felton, just off the A697. The parish includes the church of St Bartholomew in Whittingham itself, and two other churches – St John the Baptist in Edlingham, and Bolton Chapel. These two churches used to be in their own parish which was historically part of the Benefice of Alnwick, but in more recent years it has been amalgamated into Whittingham. The parish was in vacancy for nearly four years and Covid hit it particularly hard. There is no regular worship in Bolton or Edlingham, and Whittingham has services every other Sunday, normally with 10 to 15 people attending. The PCC consists of six people, including one brilliant Churchwarden and a treasurer. The treasurer is stepping down at the APCM, and the Churchwarden will have served six consecutive years, so she also has to step down. There is nobody to replace either of them at present. What's more, there is absolutely no money in the bank, and the parish defaulted on its parish share in 2023. Further to this, Edlingham flooded at Christmas, and the insurers are still to sort this out. I've been grateful for the help from a number of people who have offered expertise as we look for a long-term solution to the flooding issue. As the PCC is limited, I am the defacto Churchwarden for Edlingham. If I speak in education terms, I would say the ecclesial parish of Whittingham is in special measures. But education, I feel, is the great hope in Whittingham, as the Church of England primary school, where I am a governor and lead collective worship once a fortnight, is right next door to the church.

Let's cheer ourselves up a bit with Longframlington, shall we? Our sister parish of St Mary-the-Virgin has about forty worshippers for their traditional Eucharist every Sunday morning. Some of these, typically four or six at each service, are couples who are obliged to attend as they are marrying at Brinkburn Priory. Brinkburn is an English Heritage owned property (meaning they have to maintain it), but is a consecrated place of worship, allowing us to conduct weddings and other services, such as the Eucharist on Ascension Day, in there. This year we have over thirty weddings booked in at Brinkburn – don't worry, I don't do them all. We have an excellent team, I might do six or seven a year. This is a huge missional opportunity – just a shame that none of the couples are actually our own parishioners! We do some fantastic wedding preparation for them at Talking Marriage days (2 x Saturdays) and Your Wedding Explained evenings. (5 a year). St Mary's has an efficient way of going about church business. Everything is in its place, and has been for many years. There are opportunities for change, but because things work so well there, I don't need to make a priority of this right now. St Mary's has had a particularly tough start to this year with five funerals, including the loss of three dearly loved church members – including Roger Horne, who stepped down as Churchwarden last year – a real loss to that worshipping community.

And finally, we have Felton, which is by far the busiest of the church communities...to put it in context, in terms of correspondence, I have more than double the amount in Felton of the other two combined! There are three distinct worshipping communities here – the 8am, which is a more intimate said service of weekly Holy communion, the 11am, which straddles the boundary between tradition and contemporary in its liturgy and worship, and the 5 o'clock, which is a more relaxed, informal 'fresh expression' of church. There is cross over between the three congregations, and I think a growing feeling of 'togetherness'. Messy Church is also a popular monthly event, as is the weekly Food and Fun, which in church lingo could be seen

as missional communities...more later! Additionally, we offer three home groups, are involved with monthly community teas, offer support, through our members, to the prison, a daily prayer get together on WhatsApp, Twice termly Open the Book sessions in Felton and Swarland schools plus lots of extra work going through our pioneering children's and families work with Ignite, Sarah Hamer. We have a wonderful church building, cared and looked after by so many, and a highly capable congregation and PCC.

So there we have it – three parishes, six churches and five distinct worshipping congregations, each of which I oversee, but because I can't be at everything, I still always kind of feel on the edge of things! And I know that is certainly the experience of my family too. That's the real challenge of multi-parish ministry.

I have to confess the workload of this role has taken a lot of adjusting to, and is ever increasing. Part of the reason for that is situations outside my control, such as flooding at Edlingham. But other things, I haven't quite got a handle on yet. And what that means is I don't often devote the time I should be to writing my messages, my sermons. That time in study – listening to God's word and sharing it with his people – and that makes me really sad! In doing so, I'm doing you all a dis-service. What I've noticed is that the way this church has been set up before the vacancy was as a church with a full-time vicar. Let me explain...My predecessor worked incredibly hard in building up St Michael's in Felton. Part of his role was with the youth and children's team at the diocese, and so there was a more children's work going on here, particularly on a Sunday. James was blessed with an Assistant priest in Longframlington, Michael Hepper, who was able to take on more responsibilities there, allowing James to spend more time in Felton. Michael has now retired but continues to assist me in Longframlington. As you know, when recruiting for me, the diocese added Whittingham parish into the mix.

My role is Priest-in-Charge for all three parishes, and as a rule of thumb, I should probably spend around a third of my time in each. You will remember that we had to cancel this evening in early January as I was ill...there was obviously a lot going round after Christmas, and I think there was probably some stress in there too. But it was probably a good thing that it happened...I think God was using that time to say 'you need to rethink this.' I think perhaps Felton needs to be led in a different way to the others, but for me, it is one part of a bigger role across rural Northumberland, this is one job, not three - and so we need to work together to find a simpler way forward that will enable this church to grow, enable us to outwork the ministries God is calling us to, and enable me to outwork the prophetic, prayerful and pastoral ministry that I believe God is calling me to.

## Where do we need to go?

I spent some time looking at the book of Nehemiah – a classic biblical text about a building project! And without going over the whole story, if I were to summarise it, Nehemiah saw a problem and was distressed. He saw the city of Jerusalem in ruins and he knew that God was calling on him to rebuild the walls. And so he left a responsible position in the Persian government to do just that. But did Nehemiah build those walls himself? Did he pick up a trowel and mortar? No! He was the figurehead – the book is written in the first person. He takes the credit because with leadership comes great responsibility. But ultimately, the wall was built by many talented labourers and skilled craftsmen (chapter 3) who shared that vision. What Nehemiah did was he organized the builders. And it wasn't always easy – they faced great opposition. Threats, ridicule, insults. Disunity and sabotage. So Nehemiah's role was to cast the vision, to organize the builders and to make sure they were able to fulfil their task by coming up with strategies that would combat these

problems. And how did he do that? From beginning to end, Nehemiah prayed for God's help. He never hesitated to ask God to remember him. And the other strategy he used was encouragement.

*'Don't be afraid of them. Remember the Lord, who is great and awesome.'* Neh 4:14

And the enemies, the opposition were frustrated because of two things that Nehemiah did – turning to God in prayer, and turning to one another in encouragement.

And the task was complete in 52 days.

For context, it's taken me a lot longer to get the insurers to sort of the mess of the flood in Edlingham! And I wonder if perhaps the reason for that is that there is no team there, there isn't the people to be organized.

And it's through the example of Nehemiah that I bring in those three words you've been hearing quite a lot about lately – simpler, bolder and together.

Nehemiah tells the story of a monumental task that through organization and delegation was made much simpler, so simple it didn't take long to complete. It tells the story of how opposition to that task, and the sheer scale of the task to start with required people to be bolder in their faith, and sharing that faith with those who didn't want to listen. And it tells the story of a people who were brought together to see the task to a successful conclusion. That togetherness for Nehemiah came about through prayer and encouragement. And I wonder if those are the things that we need to set in motion before we can even begin our task.

#### TIME OF PRAYER

But we're not building walls. We're not rebuilding the stones of the church. This church is in remarkably good repair, with thanks to Dave and Peter and Ken and Nigel and others. What we are rebuilding is the church God is calling us to be – the "Church" is the translation of the Greek term *ekklesia*, and is used in the New Testament to identify the community of believers in Jesus Christ. And if we look at Acts 2 which has often been used as a model for this church, it says, verse 47, *'And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.'* So this is not a static community. It's not a limited community. We are called to be a growing community of believers in Jesus Christ.

So what does that look like here in Felton? Well the first thing that we must all acknowledge is we are your run of the mill village parish church. There would be very few rural churches that offer the breadth of services and activities that we do here. We're fairly unique. And that's exciting. We want to be edgy. We want to do things differently. We don't want to stand still. And we're blessed by so many who have come from different denominations, or more vibrant Anglican churches who are wanting to share new ideas and ways of worship. So we are quite unique, I think. But we're also a parochial church, not congregational...our primary mission within the context of the parish structure of the Church of England is to the people in Swarland and Eshott and West Thirston and East Thirston and Felton and Acton, and all the hamlets and farmsteads around. We are to be a pastoral presence in this community, showing the face of Christ and doing the work of his hands right here – in baptism, in funeral ministry – from the cradle to the grave and at all times in between. The parish structure is our greatest strength in mission, but it has its limitations too. We are bound by our parish share. We have to share our vicar. We don't have a staff team – and I think that's crucial if we fall into the trap of comparing ourselves with larger urban evangelical churches. We are

custodians over an ancient building. We have civic and community and school responsibilities that sometimes can get in the way of the primary task of a Christian community – to worship God.

And it's worship that draws many of you here. In our fluid and mobile and consumerist culture, parish boundaries mean very little to people. We can jump in a car and travel to the places we choose. We can choose to worship in our local church, or travel down the road. We come to worship because it is our calling as Christians, but it helps to be in a place where we feel comfortable and welcome, and among people who share our values. And so we have a broader mission, beyond our own parish, to those travelling here from Alnwick, Amble or Longframlington. One gentleman gets a taxi here at great cost from near Ashington quite simply because he loves the welcome he receives here.

Shortly after I was ill, Mark Daniel handed me a book that really reshaped my thinking. It's called Redigging the Wells, and Mark suggested that it might inspire where we might be going here at St Michael's.

It tells the story of Fountain of Life Church, which is a network of church plants in rural Norfolk.

In the late 1990s, what was an alternative service (perhaps like our 5 o'clock service) that became a missionary congregation of the Church of England. This started from the parish church of St Nicholas Ashill, and eventually developed in the village Community Centre. After two years the congregation outgrew their first home and moved to another community centre, and after several more years they built their own purpose-built worship space. The vicar who had this vision was called Martin Down. He enlisted the help of others to step up in order to see this vision realised. Stephen Mawditt, the author of the book, and a lay member of his congregation, took on the leadership of this church plant. He eventually came to ordination himself, and the church, influenced by the New Wine movement, and Alpha, flourished.

Their model of ministry looks very different to ours...and I could tell you more about how they are governed, their worship patterns, their gatherings etc...but you can read about that for yourself. I don't share this with you because it's a model for us to follow, I tell you this because rural ministry does not have to be sleepy, predictable and in terminal decline. God calls on us all to build something new, to write a new story in the place where we are.

The start of that story is a call for us to be **simpler, bolder and together**.

**Simpler** – God is calling on us to listen for his voice, to be attentive to his word, to dwell in his presence. To not fill our diaries with stuff but to make more space. Eileen Ferguson shared some words with me recently from Amos 5:21-24.

*"I can't stand your religious meetings.  
I'm fed up with your conferences and conventions.  
I want nothing to do with your religion projects,  
your pretentious slogans and goals.  
I'm sick of your fund-raising schemes,  
your public relations and image making.  
I've had all I can take of your noisy ego-music.  
When was the last time you sang to me?  
Do you know what I want?  
I want justice—oceans of it.*

Our committees and church meetings can become the false worship that God hates. We have to once again find that passion for Jesus which changes lives and transforms communities. One of the programmes I

sometimes watch is the great Pottery Throwdown and I'm quite mesmerized by Keith, and when a contestant makes a beautiful pot, Keith is overcome with emotion. And I remember thinking, if Keith can get so excited about an earthenware vessel, how much more can we get excited about Jesus. And the message of Jesus is so simple, isn't it...first we must love God and flowing from that, we must love our neighbour. (Repeat with hand gestures).

We are called to be **bolder** – to proclaiming gospel unashamedly. There are some things that we do really well. Our baptism services are an open goal for us to proclaim the good news. We get such good feedback. And Christmas as well – to get more than 200 people in here on Christmas Eve – some of my clergy friends couldn't believe it. One man who was visiting his family from Doncaster said to me on the way out... That was 'bloody brilliant'. But how do we follow these things up? How do we make that link between baptism or Christmas and the broader message of God's plan for the whole of our lives? Where's the intentionality in linking our activities with the faith that calls us to be there in the first place? In my previous parish, the Alpha course played a big part in that and I'd dearly like to see that here!

Finally, we are called to be **Together** – We may attend different services, we may come from different church traditions, but we come together with one purpose – to worship God. It's not important how we worship but it is important that we do it together. We are a gathered people. Let's look at that passage from Acts 2 about the early church...

*<sup>42</sup> They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. <sup>43</sup> Everyone was filled with awe at the many wonders and signs performed by the apostles. <sup>44</sup> All the believers were **together** and had everything in common. <sup>45</sup> They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. <sup>46</sup> Every day they continued to meet **together** in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate **together** with glad and sincere hearts, <sup>47</sup> praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.*

There is a recurring theme here! Now I have a hunch that the picture we paint of this might be far rosier than the actual reality of it. Our churches are a flawed institution. We bicker. We fall out. We have differences of opinion. And I bet it was just the same for this church too. Yet in spite of that, because they were together and devoted to their fellowship, the Lord added to their number daily. This was attractive and people wanted to be part of it. Isn't it wonderful that despite our flaws, Jesus loves us. And even more...Jesus chooses us to his work. We need to rejoice in the fact that we are not perfect, that sometimes in this Anglican church we might not know what colour season it is or how things should be set up correctly. But if we're motivated by order and rules, we might be getting it wrong... it's the motivation of love and loving our neighbour, that we become the church God is calling us to be. We need to be more tolerant of one another, more permissive of our differences. We need to acknowledge the gifts that people bring to this community, for those that volunteer their time in all sorts of roles, to put their head up the parapet. We simply need to love one another.

# What do we need to get there?

## SONG – Holy Spirit Living Breath of God

Let us dwell on the first verse of this song...

*Holy Spirit, living breath of God,  
breathe new life into my willing soul.  
Let the presence of the risen Lord  
come renew my heart and make me whole.  
Cause your word to come alive in me;  
give me faith for what I cannot see,  
give me passion for your purity:  
Holy Spirit, breathe new life in me.*

I've had this idea in my mind about St Michael's for a little while – and that is 'resource church'. It's not what we are now, but I think it's what we could one day be. Typically a resource church is in the centre of a diocese, in a large city, usually close to a thriving student population, and has bags of money from the church commissioners behind it. Obviously, that description does not fit here! But the purpose of a resource church is to serve other churches around it, enabling them to pioneer new ways of doing things in order to grow. It's similar to the planting model, that is probably most famous through HTB. But there aren't any rural resource churches. And yet, perhaps we could be a beacon on the hill for churches in this area to see how the spirit of God can move in different ways in rural Northumberland. Of course, we don't have the resources to be a resource church, you might be thinking. It's important we acknowledge those things that we don't, or can't do well. And it's true – there's so much more we could do with children and young people. There's so much more we could do with our worship so we don't need to rely on videos. But we simply don't have the resources to do all that we would want. This is certainly something we should be praying for.

But one thing we have done well is training our lay ministry team. When I arrived, I'd heard about the lay ministry team, but understood the need to do a bit more with them. We spent six weeks in the autumn doing some training on various aspects of Anglican identity and leading worship, and I have to say it was a really special time where I got to know the team and they got to know me. Consequently they are affirmed in their roles, appointed for the task by the PCC and soon to receive formal authorization from the bishop. It was a model of training that the diocese put on us somewhat, but one that they really like and now want us to do more of the same! There will be more opportunities for those who wish to be part of our lay ministry team, leading services and giving messages, in the autumn.

And to be the church God is calling us to be, we will need to rely more and more on lay ministry, because the truth is, we're running out of priests! This means in the future, we won't be able to offer as many services as Holy Communion. But perhaps this is where God is leading us. The church is an institution which so often means control...but in the future, there is likely to be more freedom to let go, and embrace 'the priesthood of all believers'.

And within that, my role really will be one of an overseer – taking overall responsibility but delegating others to take on more active roles. Let me tell you a little about how different people are helping me. These are not appointed roles as such, and there is fluidity for anyone to step up and step back as they feel called...

- Sue Marsh – Admin support. Pew sheet, baptisms, funerals, safeguarding.
- Sue Inglis-Jones – Service prep, Communications: website, ACNY. Weddings Co-ordinator for Brinkburn
- Liz Rowark – 11am service. Worship, sound and PA.
- Mark Winter – outreach in our community. Extra services on occasion.
- Gabby – pastoral support
- Moyra – Volunteers Co-ordinator
- Sarah – Ignite. Children’s and families worker.

(I know how important children and young people are to the life of this church, and how since Covid, things have looked quite different. In fact, I sensed a real sadness when I first arrived here that we didn’t have a thriving ministry on a Sunday morning. Of course, we’re not alone in this – I’m quite sure there is no Sunday school activities in any church in North Northumberland. And this is something we can’t change overnight. We need to build a bold strategy for not just reaching out to children and young people but supporting them on a lifelong journey of discipleship. )

As we come towards the end of our time together, as a way of response, Moyra and I will share with you some of the ways in which you might be involved in the life of this church here as we aim to become that **simpler, bolder and together** church that will serve this community, and perhaps one day resource churches around here.

### Next steps?

- Ask yourself, where might I fit?
  - Developing our sense of ‘welcome’ and ‘belonging’
  - Developing an ‘afternoon’ congregation, promoting Messy Church and 5 o clock service together
  - Exploring Godly Play for 11am service
  - Simpler meeting structure, planned for year
  - Developing our lay team – and looking for those who may wish to ‘step up’ to a more advanced role as a reader or ordination
  - Creating more space for God – Listening Together event
- 
- Annual event – seeing where we’ve come from, and looking for the next step. These things take time, and we don’t quite know where it will end up. But let’s take some heart from this scripture as we draw to a close...

Let’s return to the example of Nehemiah. It was only through **prayer** and **encouragement** that the building work could begin. It was only through **organization** and **willing servants** that the work could be completed. But then what happened? The exiles returned to Jerusalem. The city was once more filled with the spirit of God. Might this be our experience here in Felton too. Some words of scripture to finish...



Isaiah 43:19

*This is what the LORD says—*

*he who made a way through the sea,  
a path through the mighty waters,  
<sup>17</sup> who drew out the chariots and horses,  
the army and reinforcements together,  
and they lay there, never to rise again,  
extinguished, snuffed out like a wick:*

<sup>18</sup> *“Forget the former things;  
do not dwell on the past.*

<sup>19</sup> *See, I am doing a new thing!  
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?  
I am making a way in the wilderness  
and streams in the wasteland.*

SONG – Praise is Rising