

Suzanne Evans's

PARISH PROFILE



**St Mary
Bletchingly**

There is usually nothing a journalist rebels against more than being told what to write, but in the case of St Mary, Bletchingly, I will make an exception.

The church is about to go into an interregnum and the Churchwardens asked if I could make this parish profile a "good advert for a new Rector".

If this is the least I can do for an obviously thriving, warm and friendly church, I'm happy to oblige, because they deserve a good one. And they did buy me a jolly good lunch too and you know what they say about their being no such thing as a free lunch...

Actually, lunch was a regular monthly get together at the local golf club for anyone who

finds them self alone on Sunday lunchtime or fancies a change of scene. And, as a single mother whose daughter disappears off with daddy every other weekend, this was one of my 'lonely' Sundays so I was more than happy to join them. It's one of the many popular initiatives the current Rector, Clare Edwards, has introduced during her time in Bletchingly. "Clare has given us a great vision here," says Churchwarden Myrtle Bourns. "We intend to carry on with what she started through our interregnum - being a family-orientated, warm, friendly church that does wonderful children's work and holds communion at the heart of worship. She has been our rock and I hope whoever takes over from her doesn't stop anything she has begun."

Clare (photo left) has been appointed Canon Pastor at Canterbury Cathedral, a role with responsibilities that would make a lesser woman quake in her kitten heels. She will be ministering to the spiritual and emotional needs of the 250-strong cathedral staff; the 300-strong Sunday congregation and the thousands of visitors who stream through the Cathedral each week. Her current congregation have no doubt that she will excel in her new role, but will clearly miss her and do their best to ensure her legacy lives on. A new broom sweeping clean is the last thing they want.

Bletchingly is a real village church - by which I mean that it tries and succeeds in being all

things to all people. It certainly doesn't fit into any obvious mould. I visited for a 10.15am Parish Communion service during Lent that featured a unique combination of traditional and modern church practices; old and new music. There was a dignified gospel procession but there was no incense. The hymns were a mix of Victorian classics and Graham Kendrick/Restoration music. Clare alone sung the psalm but there was a congregational sung response. The Peace was said at the end of the service, once the children had joined us; was very relaxed and went on for some time. The revedos was veiled for Lent - but only partly - with the crucifixion still showing.

"I don't like labels," says Clare, "but if I have to give us one it would be 'liberal catholic.' The sacrament is of utmost importance to me but I don't think a lot of stomping around adds to the moment or makes God more present. Jesus ministered in people's homes so I aim for a homely feel. So we wear vestments and have processions but don't have incense except at Epiphany, Candlemas and at our Patronal Festival, when I can explain its use and where it fulfils a useful purpose."

"Of course you can mix high and low, old and new. Any living church is going to be writing and developing new things but that doesn't mean you have to scrap the old. We now have a supplement hymnbook of about ninety new hymns and no one bats an eyelid. You have to move your traditions and make them real for now."

Whatever the ingredients of Clare's particular spiritual recipe, the flavours mingle beautifully and prove addictive to the unwary.

Clare Carter moved to Bletchingly with her fiancé and only wanted to get married in

the church. Both ended up getting confirmed in the same year and are now regular attenders with their two-year old son, Zachary, who is presumably one of the lucky recipients of the 'happy bags' provided for the under fours who come to church.

"Everybody knows everybody; we feel welcomed here and a part of the church - especially Zachary. No one minds if he runs around sometimes in the service - I've never felt here like this is the kind of church where you can't bring a baby. The first day I came here I remember Myrtle coming up to me with a

church out. "We've been coming ever since. It just felt so natural. I don't know why this church attracts us as opposed to any others because I haven't been to any others! I don't have a clue what else is going on out there. Other churches could all be either terrible or much better than this, for all I know!"

Fourteen-year-old Josh is a credit to the vastly improved children's ministry that has flourished under Clare's direction. She was a paediatric nurse before she was ordained and was keen to revive the Sunday School. Josh insists he will still be going to St Mary's

time of it. Developers prepared to pay £600,000 have twice applied for planning permission for the site and failed. If they lose their appeal, with money raised from the sale of a old chapel, donations and pledges, St Mary's hope they can make an offer which will be acceptable to the owner. "The vision," enthuses Clare, "is to build a new centre where we can have coffee; three Sunday School groups; a crèche; counselling rooms - maybe somewhere where children can meet with their estranged parents and where victims of domestic violence can seek support. It



big smile on her face and a big 'Hello' and I haven't stopped wanting to come back since."

When John Thurston moved to the village eleven years ago, church was the last thing on his mind. Neither he nor his wife had been to church as children one morning - for no reason he can explain - they decided to try their parish

when he's older, with equally enthusiastic friends. As one of the church bellringers, he rings what is widely considered to be the finest round of ten bells in Surrey.

A fortnightly healing ministry is another of Clare's initiatives. Betty Bristow, a member of the healing team, points out that it covers healing in its widest sense: "from the environment; through our community and our inner selves," she explains.

"The emphasis is not on physical healing but wholeness. We take communion and then wait to the side of the church and then if people want to, they come to us. Sometimes we have a specific request and they tell us what their problem is, otherwise we just say a set prayer."

The parish is keen to extend their healing ministry ideally buying land near the church for a new church hall. The current hall has no ground floor level, so the elderly or those with pushchairs don't have an easy

would perfectly fit the healing ministry we have started - not the throw your crutches out healing ministry but a ministry that shows in the smile you put to someone; the arm you put around their shoulder; the appropriate word; the listening ear. I really do think God has our name on that land but I wish He wouldn't keep us waiting! I'd sell the church silver if I could to raise more money but I can't as it's on permanent loan to the V&A!"

I think she's joking but I'm not quite sure. Maybe she has a wicked sense of humour, like Archbishop Desmond Tutu who was a part time curate at St Mary's in 1966 and is remembered for having a permanent smile on his face.

So, that's the advert over. Good luck to Clare in Canterbury and here's to the new Rector at St Mary Bletchingly, whoever he or she may be. If they are half as happy as Clare has clearly been there, they will clearly be very happy indeed.



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