

Dear Friends,

What are you going to do when you retire? It's a question that many people have been asking me over the past few months since I announced my intention to retire this coming February. For a start, we'll be moving from the Rectory in Breinton Road to our house the other side of town in Tupsley. It needs some building work and decorating; so, to begin with, I shall be donning my overalls and wielding a paintbrush and roller!

Once we've more or less sorted the house I hope to return to doing some farm-work with my eldest son, Christopher, who is managing a dairy farm of 350 dairy cows south of Gloucester. As many of you know, I started my working life in agriculture as a consultant for what was then the Milk Marketing Board. Going back to some practical farm work will no doubt be a challenge but cows haven't changed that much in nearly forty years and they still need to be milked and cleared up afterwards! Margaret and I also hope to do some travelling around the country, visiting friends and relations.

As a member of the clergy of the Church of England following retirement, I am not allowed to officiate at any services until I am granted what is known as a Permission to Officiate, a PTO. I have to apply to the Bishop for the PTO and cannot do so in less than six months after retirement. Things are going to feel very different after thirty-eight years of parish ministry. If I am honest, I am a little fearful as I really cannot imagine what life is going to be like.

In these last few months, I've been looking back and remembering the many people for whom it has been my privilege to know and share something of their life's journey; something of their faith journey as a parish priest and as Diocesan Director of Ordinands. There have been many highs and the lows; many celebrations and times of commiseration.

Through it all, I have a tremendous sense of gratitude to a God who called me from one way of life to another and is now calling me to something else. I have a great sense of thankfulness to a Church and individual bishops who had the confidence in me to place me in situations of trust and responsibility. For this is the very nature of calling or vocation for everyone within the Church. This is so whether we are called to ministry in the places we live and work or because we are called to some specific licensed ministry within the Church. For all of us, as followers of Jesus Christ, are called to something that is special for each of us. Each of us is unique and uniquely loved by God; each of us has a part to play in the mission and ministry of Our Lord.

At the very start of the Christian story is a young woman who hears a call from God and who responds positively with courage and maybe not a little trepidation. Mary, of all young women of her generation was chosen to be the mother of Our Lord. Her response could have been to say, 'No. not me'; 'No –not yet' 'No –not ever'. But we know she didn't respond like that. She put her trust in a loving God who was with her throughout her life. God didn't take away her freedom to choose as he never takes our freedom to choose away. But he invited her to make the most important decision of her life. We can only speculate what might have happened if she had said, 'No'. Would God have invited someone else? Who knows?

The same is true for each of us when God calls us to some task in our lives. Maybe you have felt called to something in the past or even are being called to something now and are saying 'No' or have said 'No' or are hesitant to make a response either way. Is that the end of it? I think not; for everything I know and trust about our God is that he gives second chances, and third chances and as many chances as we need to respond to His love with our love. This is clear to me from the encounters that Jesus has with so many people throughout his ministry on earth. Yes, his call is challenging to all who hear it and some clearly feel the cost is too much. But to those who respond the rewards are beyond measure.

We cannot know what the future will hold and we do live in uncertain times. My hope and my prayer for the Church, and especially that bit of it which we call the 'West Hereford Team', is that you will continue to journey faithfully with courage and respond positively to God's call. Thank you to parishioners and all my colleagues, past and present, for allowing me to share your journeys over this past thirty-eight years.

You will see from the service schedule published later in this edition of Teamtalk that there are a number of opportunities for Margaret and me to say farewell to our friends in the parishes. I am to preside at the Cathedral Eucharist on Sunday 19th January at 10.00am; on 25th January, there is to be a Burn's Night Supper and Ceilidh in the evening at Holy Trinity Church; on Sunday 26th January I will preside and preach at the Parish Eucharist at St Michael's, Breinton for the last time at 11.00am followed by a lunch in the Village Hall. On Saturday 1st February there will be a supper in All Saints Church at 7.00pm and on Sunday 2nd February there will be a Team Eucharist followed by lunch in St Nicholas' Church. There will be 'sign-up' sheets in each of the churches from the New Year. Please feel free to come to each event irrespective of whether it's being held in the church you habitually attend or not!

Often at this time in a clergy's ministry, there is a cash collection and something is bought by which to remember the parishes, which is very kind and generous. I don't want to seem ungrateful, but I would really rather receive a token gift and not something too expensive. If you do want to give a cash gift, then I would greatly appreciate one in my name to one of the charities we support.

With my love and every blessing for Christmas and the New Year,

Rob North