

BUILDING FUND APPEAL

Sunday 17TH September 2023

Some weeks ago, I was asked to celebrate Mass in one of our secondary schools. The chosen theme was courage. Today's Gospel invites us to forgive, not just once, not just twice, but over and again. Forgiveness doesn't always come easily, it can be hard, and where the thing being forgiven touches on us deeply and personally, it can take courage, real courage, to forgive, not least when those around us prefer to hold on to hurts, real or imagined. As I was speaking to the young people I began asking myself, when have you ever been courageous? The world outside might consider priesthood to be a courageous thing, but for me there was a naturalness in priesthood, it is something I felt called to from a young age. But, although I wouldn't say being a priest is the most courageous thing I have ever done, I would say that being a priest, and the desire to serve the people and communities I have been called to serve, has called for courage, not only on my part, but on the part of the Parish Teams and Parishioners I have had the privilege of working with and among. And this brings me to now, to this weekend's launch of our Building Fund Appeal, and an invitation for you and for me – amidst the economic challenges that we face - to be courageous – to imitate, for example, our earliest parishioners – parishioners who had the courage to imagine and to build - who built our first church on London Road, and just twenty-five years later, had the courage to lay the foundation stone for the church we worship in today.

The Building Fund Appeal we are launching today has its beginnings in our last Parish Assembly and its reflection on the quality of our Welcome, Worship and Witness. Following that Assembly I began, with a group of parishioners, to reflect on the complex of parish buildings asking how they might better serve our life and mission - and in particular our desire to be a more open community, where newcomers might feel readily welcome and at home. As we did so we bore in mind the need for more catechetical spaces and better accessibility, as well as the need for a more sustainable and environmentally friendly set of buildings.

Alongside a host of practicalities, and not least the management of the likely costs, we have steered towards a three phased development plan: a first phase, looking to the enlargement of the porch and refurbishment of the church forecourt; a second phase concentrating on the redevelopment of the presbytery, addressing immediate maintenance issues and improving energy efficiency, creating further catechetical and rentable meeting spaces, and delivering a clear separation between the priests living quarters and a modernised suite of parish offices, and finally, a third Phase, concerned with the refurbishment of the Sanctuary, re-decoration of the Church & cleaning of the Church Organ. Of all the phases the least developed is Phase 3 and the most developed is Phase 1. If you take time to look on the display boards in the porch you'll see what is intended in Phase 1 – how its completion will reset the church within a garden, not a car park, includes new glass doors providing a sense of openness and welcome, and creates a new more 'sociable' forecourt which can be gated off from the main road, is interspersed with flowerbeds and benches, and is served by additional kitchen and toilet facilities.

So, as you can imagine, we are looking to a major and exciting redevelopment of the parish complex. As I say, the least developed aspect of the project is Phase 3. Obviously, much depends on what we can raise, and if we reach our target, and can deliver Phases 1 & 2, I think we can progress the plans for Phase 3.

So, what, you are asking, is the actual target for our Building Fund Appeal? Fortunately, as you are aware, we received some substantial legacies around two years ago – these will be used to support the works outlined above - but needless to say the project we envisage is a huge undertaking, and hand in hand with big projects goes big bills. Therefore, in addition to the legacies we have received, we are looking to raise a further £500,000. Its an ambitious target, a courageous target, but I am confident that we can reach it.

On Sunday 29th October we will have Pledge Sunday. As that Sunday draws closer we will make pledge cards available, asking people to consider what they can give, in addition to their current giving, and knowing that pledges can be cancelled if circumstances change. In the meantime I will be saying more about the project, the works involved, and in particular the impact which your giving and the proposed works will have on the ongoing life and mission of our parish.

As part of this appeal myself and a team of volunteers, many of whom have worked with me over the last two years, are offering to meet individually with anyone who would like to discuss the project in greater detail. Moreover, there will be an opportunity to find out more and to ask questions at two open meetings in early October. Details of these can be found in this weekend's bulletin. But all this said, what is it that I really want to say to you today as we launch our Fundraising Appeal?

So much was lost during Covid and over the last year or so we have done a huge amount in terms of our building back, but if I have a hope, it is this – that our building back, will be a building back for the better and for the future – not a building back for the parish and community we were, but a building back for the parish and community that we need to become – and this kind of building demands courage – courage to do things differently, courage to revisit our sacramental preparation, courage to create a parish complex that is fit for the mission ahead.

We could launch an appeal asking every household, every family, to give or pledge an average or recommended amount. We could do this, but we are not going to ... because every household, every family, is different. What is easily possible for one, may not be possible for others, where some could readily give more, others may struggle to give considerably less. You see, when you think about it, courage, like people, comes in all shapes and sizes – for one person courage might well be jumping out of a plane or the climbing of Everest, but for another, who is suffering or ill, grieving or depressed, courage may well be in the seeming ordinariness of things – in getting out of bed, climbing the stairs, venturing outside.

So, what I want to say in launching this appeal, is be courageous. Don't concern yourself with what others are or aren't doing, don't concern yourself with what is average, concern yourself rather with you ... and ask yourself realistically and honestly what courageous giving might look like for you and your household. What is it that this family can pledge over and above its usual Sunday giving ... and in that pledging know that they have done all that they can do to make this parish, this church - a place of welcome, a house of worship, a call to witness.

Fr Michael