

Proclaiming the Gospel afresh in this generation:

St. Alphege hosted the annual Civic Service on Sunday 30th June, welcoming and praying for the mayor and elected councillors. Our new Mayor, Cllr Shahin Ashraf MBE, is Muslim, and we were therefore pleased to include a reading from the Qur'an focussing upon God's truth and light. This was wonderfully intoned by Imam Qari Elaimy from The Hub, Solihull, with the English translation read by Madam Mayor. We then heard 'Ya Ellahi', an Arabic rendition of Leonard Cohen's 'Hallelujah', sung beautifully by Mikhael Mala. The related themes for the service were unity and light, in view of the growing diversity of Solihull Metropolitan Borough, as well as the general election, then just a few days away. We enjoyed a fine sermon from the mayor's chaplain, Rev. Paul Day, along with anthems by Bruckner and Stanford showcasing the talent of our St. Alphege choirs. Uplifting hymns included, 'We have a dream', based upon the famous speech by Dr. Martin Luther King. At the end of the service, before the mayor and councillors were commissioned, faith leaders from different traditions lit candles in honour of the uniqueness and integrity of each faith, whilst recognising that the light is one. The service concluded with the pronouncement of God's blessing and singing of the National Anthem.

Through the planning and leading of this important service, I was reminded of what it truly means to be the established or national Church of England, privileged to extend God's welcome to all and to serve every citizen without fear or favour. The opportunity this year to be more intentionally inclusive sets a helpful precedent for the future – with the expectation that future mayors may wish to choose their own reading to sit alongside the chosen Gospel. In making this choice the key is not so much the source (which could be from any faith tradition or none) but rather how it supports the theme of the service and compliments the Gospel message. We regularly apply this same principle for occasional services (weddings and funerals), where the Church has for many years overwhelmingly said 'Yes' to requests for the inclusion of readings and music from alternate traditions, because those asking are unfailingly respectful of our tradition and thoughtful in their choices.

Whilst celebrating this service – positively received by so many – I am conscious that some found the changes unsettling, raising questions about what it means to Christ's Church and faithful to the Gospel Jesus proclaimed. Similar concerns have been raised about the recent decision of the Church of England to offer 'Prayers of Love and Faith' in support and celebration of loving relationships of various shapes – including same sex relationships.

Whilst change can be challenging, and whilst an honoured place needs to be reserved for those who with grace and integrity retain traditional views, it is important, amidst a changing society and changing Church, to recognise that the bedrock has not changed – namely love, and in particular God's grace and love we

receive through Christ. And important to know that the more inclusive Church we are becoming is not in spite of what the Scriptures say, but because of the Good News we find in them – recognising that in Christ all barriers have been broken down.

Looking to the future, I am greatly encouraged to see the positive reception to the changes we are steadily making, especially from friends of the Church who are not, or not yet, full members. It is clear, that when we have courage to open our doors fully to everyone in the community, when we stand ready to offer God's welcome unconditionally without judgment, there remains a warm reception for the Church's voice and an openness to the Gospel proclaimed by Jesus Christ, namely, his promise of redemption, freedom, and renewal, and thereby the fullness of life he brings us by his Spirit.