

## St Mary's Discipleship

I wonder how we each define the word *Disciple*?

A literal definition could be “a pupil or adherent to the doctrines of another.”

Or it could be “a follower of someone.”

Personally, I like “someone who embraces and assists in spreading the teaching of another.”

As Christians the “another” is, of course, Christ. We should all be doing what we can not only to follow Christ's teachings but, as that definition states, to try to teach and inform others of those teachings. In a time when children think that Easter is when Christ was *born* (and maybe not just Children), our duty to spread the Gospel is perhaps more important now than it has been for centuries.

Here at St Mary's, we are all disciples. But do we take our discipleship seriously? How do we manage to be disciples during a pandemic? Can we really manage to spread the Good News of Jesus during lockdown? I like to think I'm doing what I can through the choir. We've done as much as we can via livestreaming and sharing virtual performances to local Facebook groups etc, but I know that I *could* do much more.

In normal times, I try not to be embarrassed about declaring my faith. If I'm rehearsing a piece that is clearly written with a message of faith at its heart, I try to get people to respond to that, whether I know that they're a Christian or not. It's difficult doing this at the best of times but this dreadful pandemic makes it seem all but impossible.

And yet we all, members of this church family here at St Mary's, have a huge advantage. We belong to a loving family, and one that, normally, meets in one of the most beloved buildings in Maldon. This church is perhaps *the* most iconic building in the town. After all, how many images of Maldon have St Mary's sitting in the centre? How many local businesses use views of St Mary's in their advertising, or on their logos? Even though you're only watching me via a screen at present, you're still able to see inside the building and to imagine what it feels like when we're all here together.

We all love this church; and it is much loved throughout the town and particularly here around the Hythe and the local area. Local people may not come to church regularly but they still think of St Mary's as "their" church.

This is a wonderful asset. We already celebrate the attractiveness of our church as a tool of evangelism. People *like* coming here. In normal times there is nearly always someone here praying.

I have always thought we could do so much more with our building to spread the Gospel. Strangely, the lockdowns have provided us with an opportunity for doing that. We are getting large numbers of people watching our services online. Many of them (I suspect possibly the majority) have never actually stepped inside St Mary's before. I hope we can invite these people to enter physically once they're allowed to do so. Encouraging people to come in; for whatever reason; can be just the start of a spiritual journey.

This is why we are engaged in our St Mary's at 900 project. By renewing and improving our beautiful building, we can do so much more with it. We can invite so many more people inside. It is a really exciting time for St Mary's and for us; the family that lives here.

We're in an odd place at present. The project has started and we can already see the results of the first phase in our beautiful new organ and gallery, but successive lockdowns have meant that we can't really use and enjoy them as we'd intended. Still, we know that we *will* be able to enjoy the fruits of our labours. Life continues, as it must, and there will be an end to the pandemic; however far away that seems.

So, as I stand here at the end of February 2021, we need to prepare for life getting back to normal. We have to continue working on our project to ensure that St Mary's is here for another 900 years; looking at how we move onto the next phase; new heating, lighting and creating a more flexible space. This is all incredibly exciting but we mustn't lose sight of the fact that we *also* need to ensure that we keep St Mary's going on a day to day basis.

People often tell me how lucky we are to have such a talented choir, containing so many talented individuals. This is true but look at yourselves, watching me at home. Every single one of *you* is talented. You all have gifts. Some of you are gifted with figures. Some of you are painters, or crafts

people. Some of you are gifted flower arrangers or cooks. And some of you are good at DIY and maintenance.

As part of our discipleship here at St Mary's, we need each and every one of you to consider your talents and how they could help us to spread the Gospel. How they could increase our effectiveness as disciples of the Lord Jesus Christ.

At present there is a very small group of people doing most of the work. This isn't sustainable for the long term. We need more people to consider taking on small jobs: to consider standing for election to the PCC. Most of all, we need someone to consider putting themselves forward as Treasurer. Dawn is one of our most precious assets but if she continues doing the work of two people she will run herself into the ground. We cannot let her do that. We need to treasure her and support her. All of us needs to look at our own talents and consider how we can use them for St Mary's and for the Kingdom of God.

Then we also, I'm afraid, have financial responsibilities. It costs us around £50,000 per annum, or **£145** a day to keep St Mary's open.

This figure is made up of normal running costs, such as electricity (£662 in February alone), water and other bills. It includes salaries and, most importantly, it includes the Parish Share, which is the amount we must pay to the Diocese. This money provides stipendiary clergy. It provides the housing for them, and it provides their pensions. It also provides for all the support we get from the diocese, including the bishops and their offices.

Our parish share is currently **£30,000**. When we get our new stipendiary priest, this is likely to go up. We have been able to pay our parish share in full in recent years; thanks to the fact that we get a discount because our Priest in Charge has been non-stipendiary.

So our costs are going to rise and we need to ensure that we have enough income to cover them. We don't know the exact amount yet but it's likely that that daily figure for keeping St Mary's open will rise from £145 to around £175.

In normal times, we get a certain amount of income from fund-raising but the bulk of our income has to come from St Mary's members: you and I. Being unable to do any fundraising over the past year has made this responsibility all the keener.

The traditional idea of tithing to the church is based on every member giving 10% of their income. Though there are some evangelical churches which manage to achieve that amount, the Church of England doesn't expect anything like that from its members. According to John Preston, the National Stewardship Officer of the Church of England, the average member contributes around 3.3% of their income. Some can afford to contribute more, some less.

In 2015, average weekly giving across the Church of England was £10 per capita. The Archdeacon recently told us that we need to be aiming for £15 per head. In fact, the average here at St Mary's at present is just £4.

Now we are not accusing anyone of not doing their bit. Nor are we trying to guilt trip people into giving more. Each and every one of us has unique circumstances and we each have different responsibilities and obligations. But if we are truly to be Disciples: if we are truly to be followers of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we need to review our giving to St Mary's on at least an annual basis.

I wonder how many annual memberships you have?

My National Trust membership is £76 a year. My membership of the Tate Gallery is £132 a year and, until recently, I was paying £33 per month; nearly £400 a year for a gym membership that I wasn't even using!

As an average, £15 a week is not an enormous sum to be contributing in order to be a member of something that is far more important, far more life-enhancing than membership of the National Trust, the Tate or even of your local gym.

That Tate membership has increased to £132 a year from just £40 twenty years ago. Has your giving to St Mary's increased over the same period? Please review your planned giving to St Mary's, consider setting up a standing order, if you've not already done so. And please, please think of your talents and how you can offer them to the St Mary's family so that we really can ensure that this wonderful place can continue witnessing to the Love of God here in Maldon for another 900 years.

The Gradual for the feast of Dedication is *Locus iste* famously set to music by Anton Bruckner.

This place was made by God an inestimable mystery;  
it is without reproach.