

+WEEKLY SERMON

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Retirement Reflection

Paul writes, 'It is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus...' (Ephesians 2.8-9)

On Saturday 5 April is my 65th birthday! And it is also the day before I retire. Walking out of the Cathedral on Sunday evening after my last service will be a wrench, reflecting on all that has happened in the 41 years since I was ordained Deacon there back in 1984.

I originally came to the Diocese as an ordinand for a ten-day mission at St Gabriel's Blackburn. Little did I imagine then how much I would grow to love Lancashire and its people, and that I would in time meet my wife Gill in Accrington, where I served as Vicar.

Coming back to Lancashire together with Gill nine years ago has been a real joy, and you have all welcomed us both with such hospitality and love. In the past three years I have particularly enjoyed supporting Gill in her role as Diocesan President of Mothers' Union.

I am hugely thankful for the huge privilege of working with the amazing parishes, schools and chaplaincies of the Archdeaconry. God is at work! I thank God for the amazing way you have recovered from the ravages of Covid, for your creativity in planting so many new local congregations, for your prayers for growth and renewal, and for your heroic commitment to meeting parish share.

The growth in joyful, generous stewardship has enabled us maintain the same number of stipendiary clergy in the Diocese as we had ten years ago and to look to the future with confidence. As St Paul wrote: *'In all my prayers for you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now...'* (Philippians 1.4-5)

I have loved being part of the Making Disciples Team and working with them to grow new and deeper disciples for Jesus Christ, particularly through the daily Bible devotionals, the Fruitful App, the renewal of Whalley Abbey and the growth in the number of those involved in spiritual direction.

Retiring also makes me feel regret for my failures. Pastoral ministry is never complete, and the Prayerbook reminds us that 'we have not done those things we ought to have done.' I have been touched over the last few days by some lovely messages of appreciation.

However I know there are times when I have messed up, and there will sadly be some people for whom my example will have made it harder, rather than easier, to believe in Jesus Christ. As a priest it has always comforted me to know that God is able to build an unshakeable kingdom using very shaky people like me. If I have let you down or discouraged you in any way, I am truly sorry.

HEALTHY CHURCHES TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

However, I retire with a renewed gratitude for the Gospel of grace. We live in an increasingly grace-less world. Yet the Bible teaches that we are all sinners, saved by the grace and mercy of God, through the saving work of Christ on the cross. Knowing how much we are loved and forgiven by God helps us in turn to love and forgive.

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Thank you for taking me to your hearts, and especially for your prayers over the years. Gill and I are looking forward to a good sabbath rest over the summer, and then to seeing what God has in store for us in the next chapter of our lives. We will miss you all, but hope our paths may cross in the future, and that you will feel able to keep in touch.

Mark Ireland, Archdeacon of Blackburn