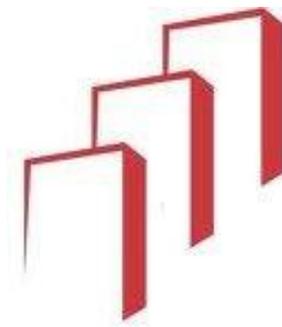


Milestones in a Ministry



Fr Neil Kelley at St Faith's: 1999-2012

To mark the ending of his 13 years' ministry as Vicar of the United Benefice, we present year-by-year edited highlights, in words and photographs, of each year's events at St Faith's
Links to earlier years may be found at the foot of these pages

AD. 2001

Two major milestones of a very different nature took place in 2001, one of which, the Walsingham pilgrimage, had been preceded by a pioneering visit to Norfolk in 2000. The pictures on these pages are from both visits: the words were written after the earlier pilgrimage.



“48 hours of rich and varied experiences. Worship in forms familiar and strange. Fellowship in the refectory queue and around the bars of the welcoming village hostelrys. A fascinating mixture of prayerful devotion and shared laughter, not all of it always entirely reverent. The mysteries of the rosary... for many a focus of prayer, for others, even by the end, about forty Hail Marys too many. The intense and wondrous silence of the Holy House, bedecked with blue and gold and a myriad of burning lights, the most moving of backgrounds to a parish at worship and in intercessory prayer. A singularly moving and spectacular Procession of Our Lady around the dark grounds, by candle-light and to the enthusiastic accompaniment of a hymn with more verses (and certainly more Ave Marias) than you could shake a stick at, and punctuated by dubious descants and just a little departure from devotion in places.



“A visit to the Roman Catholic Shrine (the Slipper Chapel down the road), and moving words in their official handbook commending a visit to ‘our’ Shrine and ‘our’ Parish Church and asking for prayers for the Anglican Diocese and its priests and people - how far and wonderfully we have come in recent years! Conversations in corridors, coffee brewed in little rooms, bonding between people who may scarcely have spoken to one another before. No sense (at least not for long) of anything alien or frightening ... and no pressure to accept anything you weren’t happy about, nor to feel left out if you chose to snooze or stroll rather than join in things.

“Parish Mass in the Parish Church in the village, packed with pilgrims and locals - a building gloriously light and airy, with acres of clear grass, after the intense and sometimes stifling weight of the shrine church. Strolling back after coffee at the back of that church through sunny, still streets lined with flint-set, pantiled-roofed cottages.

“Drinks outside the Bull in God’s providential lunchtime sunshine. The transporting experience of going down into the well in the shrine in a new baptism for the blessing of pure, cold water in the mouth, on the forehead and splashing over the hands.



“And, on the road home, abiding memories of...

Peace and a deep silence of prayer made simple and appealing.

Fellowship made stronger and laughter more ready than ever (where even the old jokes sounded new)

A place to which to bring doubts and scepticism, but where, even where those reservations remained, it did not matter.

A place where it seemed overwhelmingly and satisfyingly normal to be a Christian and an Anglican and to live a life founded in the sacraments and prayer; a place where to believe and to practise the faith was simple and natural.

A place where the unlikely became possible, the flamboyant and even the absurd were at home with the beauty of the holiness and where we could all be ourselves for a spell.

A lovely place and a lovely time, together for a time out of time with our fellow Christians and, without a shadow of doubt, with our God.”

It's Panto Time *(Oh Yes It Is!)*

Fr Neil's other big innovation at the beginning of the new millennium was the staging of an annual pantomime, under the auspices of the newly-formed United Benefice Dramatic Society.

The original idea was to write our own pantomime, lifting where necessary from existing scripts, until we discovered that borrowing from existing shows would cause copyright difficulties. It then became clear that, although there were plenty of people wanting to ‘strut their stuff’ on stage or to support the effort backstage, we didn’t actually have a producer... Enter Peter Mercer, who provided not only his own script for ‘Aladdin’, but offered himself as producer

and, as it turned out, a provider of ideas, materials, contacts and assistance from the world of local drama, and to whom we owe a very real debt of gratitude for making the whole thing possible.

As the time drew near, what seemed at first a random collection of under-rehearsed chaotic moments began to take shape, until St Mary's Church Hall was ready to be transformed into a (very) little theatre and its stage into a professionally-lit Aladdin's cave of costumes, props, make-up, sound and lighting, and a whole range of individual and highly-entertaining performances, from Widow Twankey down. It also became clear that, as far as seating was concerned, demand was far outstripping supply. What began as three performances was re-scheduled first as four, then five, then with a public dress rehearsal, even six shows, all to capacity audiences of 90+ - and with some people still unable to get tickets. By the time the last curtain came down (O.K., across, then) some 550 people had watched the efforts of a team of 30 or 40 performers and support staff, and, to judge by all the happy faces and nice things said then and later, had all thoroughly enjoyed themselves.

It would fill many pages to review all the performances and performers — the pictures will give the flavour of what went on, for anyone who missed it and didn't buy my video of the whole of one of the performances (a snip at £7.50). But justice demands a mention of Fr Neil's barn-storming performance as the Widow. Bearing all before him (and not a little behind him: it made for tricky exits through narrow gaps in the flats!) he swept on and off stage to bring the house down with cheeky songs, outrageous flirtations and larger-than-life acting, with perhaps just the occasional innuendo thrown in. Truly, there is nothing like a dame... And everyone else, young and old, large and (sometimes very) small; solo acts and chorus line, threw themselves into it and gave packed audiences a show to remember.



At the party after the last performance, a heavily-disguised local character gatecrashed the event and delivered this devastating critique....

The essence of panto lies in its humour: throughout the ages pantomime clowns have captured the hearts of children and adults with absurd costume, bizarre antics and a brand of humour which has stood the test of centuries. You obviously did not know this. Pantomime can be described as the representation of a story in dumbshow and, true to the traditions of comedy and pantomime, your production was liberally sprinkled with a varied selection of clowns and dummies. Turning to the actors, whom I hold most responsible for what happened, I begin with your chorus, the soft underbelly of the show. Every big production needs the full weight of the chorus behind it. Need I say more? The history of Lancashire abounds with stories of satanic women who practised the black arts on the craggy slopes of the Pennines. I spotted at least four of them lurking in your chorus today. If I could lump them all together I would merely ask ‘Where would we have been without them?’ You’d have had more room for scenery for a start.

Widow Twankey’s was a performance of immense stature. I will resist the temptation of saying that his was a bum performance, but it was certainly a little behind everyone else’s. Neil does of course apply the happy-go-lucky technique to his acting: happy to have got a part and lucky if he ever gets another one. He displayed his versatility to great effect — but it’s all right Neil, you can’t get arrested for it. Now I turn to Brian Williams as the Vizier. He was apparently making a comeback after long years in the wilderness. I don’t actually know how anyone can make a comeback when they haven’t been anywhere in the first place. He does, however, have a marvellous timbre to his voice, which probably explains why he looked so wooden. He didn’t have a great deal to say, which was a blessing. In fact he has more lines in his face than he had in the panto.



Emperor Moo Shoo was played by Rick Walker. I must say I found his performance quite hypnotic; and I wasn't the only one he sent to sleep. He came across as a sort of Hannibal Lecter of the panto. I just wonder what happened to his muzzle. Iain Harvey played the slave. Who on earth let him out of the bottle? And where did he get those legs? When he first came on I thought he was standing behind some park railings.

Moving on to the policemen Hoo, Flung and Dung, well, I've seen more attack from an empty crisp packet. They did at least know their lines: they just didn't know who said them. Finally I single out Margaret Davies as the kindly spirit. I just wonder what kindly spirit she'd been drinking.

I deliberately don't mention the younger members of the cast in my review, because they were magnificent. I give them one word of advice, however. Watch and study carefully the acting techniques and stage presence of the senior members of the cast. That's how you'll end up if you're not careful.

To sum up, this was a pantomime liberally riddled with memory lapses. People forgot their lines. People forgot to come on. People forgot to go off. People forgot who they were. People forgot who everyone else was. Yes, it was a very forgettable show. I believe the show has been videotaped for posterity. If so, I'm sure your version of 'Aladdin' will make the Blair Witch Project look like a chimps' tea party.

Tristram Hemard

(a.k.a. Peter Mercer)



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