

Warm welcome from church's 'gargoyles'



Gargoyles Ann Phillips (left) and Debbie Guest offering cups of tea

IMAGINE you've never been to church before.

As you step over the threshold on a damp weekday afternoon, you expect to see a dark, empty, quiet building.

Instead, you enter an airy sacred space, you hear beautiful choral music and you are welcomed by a cheerful team who make you a drink and offer you biscuits. This is Holy Trinity, Gosport, where newcomers and visitors are made to feel special.

The team who keep the church open during the week are called Holy Trinity's 'Gargoyles'. They take it in turns to sit inside the 17th century church, brewing up tea and coffee, giving visitors guided tours, chatting to them or allowing them to spend time in quiet, praying or lighting candles.

The church is now open every weekday from 1pm-4pm. And in the 12 months since the Gargoyles started, they have welcomed more than 2,000 visitors, including those from Northern Ireland, France and Nigeria.

Ann Phillips, who lives in nearby, was one of those visitors.

She felt so welcome that not only did she join the church, but became a Gargoyle herself.

"My son kept disappearing off and I didn't know where he was going," she said. "It turned out that he was coming to church. So I came in too and was made welcome. Now I'm a fully-fledged Gargoyle."

The same happened to Debbie Guest, who started coming to church last May, joining the ranks of Gargoyles almost immediately.

"What I get out of being a Gargoyle is the serenity of being in the church, the friendship, and also the sense of being part of the community," she said. "You can usually tell whether people want peace and quiet and time to reflect, or a tour, or if they just want some company."

The name of the 12-strong group came because the vicar saw two of the welcome team sitting on either side of the main entrance last summer – looking just like church gargoyles.

One of them, John Bull said: "People are often amazed when they come in and see what it looks like. It's been described as 'Gosport's best-kept secret'

because people see the rather stern Victorian exterior and don't realise it is actually classically beautiful inside. They are intrigued to hear that the pillars were made from 14 oak trees, and by our campanile, which was added in 1889."

The church was originally consecrated in 1696 because Gosport people wanted a local place of worship, rather than having to walk all the way to St Mary's, Alverstoke. In more than 300 years, only 16 priests have served as incumbent there.

Now there are plans to improve its facilities, creating a new meeting room and kitchen on the first floor and a foyer, parish office and toilets on the ground floor. All the changes will be at the west end of the church, leaving the worship area largely unaffected. A better heating system will also be installed.

This will mean the church can welcome and serve the community better, providing a meeting place for those affected by the forthcoming year-long refurbishment of the nearby Trinity Green tower blocks. No doubt the Gargoyles will be busy then.

Dreams of the future

SOMETIMES, to put it bluntly, we get it wrong.

In 1876 an internal Western Union memo said: "This 'telephone' has too many shortcomings to be seriously considered as a means of communication. The device is inherently of no value to us." In 1895, Lord Kelvin, president of the Royal Society said "Heavier-than-air flying machines are impossible."

In 1943 Thomas Watson, then chairman of IBM, wrote "I think there is a world market for maybe five computers." And in 1962, the Decca Recording Company famously rejected the Beatles saying: "We don't like their sound, and guitar music is on the way out."

How wrong they all were. Before we get too smug, however, we need to remember that imagining the future has never been easy. That is why Kairos is a challenging process for us. Imagining

the last word

by the Ven Peter Hancock, Archdeacon of the Meon



what the shape of the Church might be like in 10, 20 or 50 years' time is difficult and it is only as we pray, talk and step out in faith together that we begin to realise our hopes and dreams.

In a clamouring world of noise and busy-ness, we need to take time to listen to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and to dream dreams.

If someone asked you if you had a dream or a hope, I wonder what you might say? Timothy Radcliffe, in a recent book on the seven words from the cross, writes: "To be a Christian is to recognise that

at the foot of the cross is born our family from which no-one can be excluded."

His words capture something that I hope for: that all those that I know, and indeed all those that I don't know, might come to know the love of God in Christ.

At Easter our thoughts focus on the death and resurrection of Christ and we are reminded again of the simple but profound truth that "God is love" and "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him." (1 John 4: 9)



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