

THE HEART OF THE COMMUNITY

What has JG 300 meant to you? It has meant more to some than others! For some it has meant a lot of hard work; what will Cliff do now?! We have tried to reflect some of that in the pieces you've already heard. What I found fascinating reading the answers to these questions was how often 'people' occurred. What made it special? People. What did you learn? We got to know new people! What surprised you? The reaction of people. Children & adults – they all responded in the same way. The heart of JG 300 has been the people who have organised, taken part, told their stories, listened, enjoyed, been there & are here today. I have to say that the Steering Group was the most 'can do' group of people I have ever come across; they generated so many ideas and the only question they seemed to ask was 'how can we do this?'; very rarely did someone say 'we can't do this!'

A few weeks ago, there was a spider's web on the bird table in our garden & I tried to take its photograph; it didn't work very well; I even had to spray the water on it to make it more artistic! Anyway, I've put it on the screen, not to show off the photograph, but to use the picture as a way of describing what goes on in any community. The spider builds the web up with lots of little bits and they are all connected; the strength in the web is the strength of the silk that it uses to make the web and also the connections, the places where the silk joins up. This is a picture of any community; there is a web of relationships in any community and it always has been like that; all through the 300 years' history of Juniper Green it has been like that and it is still true, but is perhaps more under threat today than it has ever been.

For each person we know, there is a little piece of a web built up; some of us will have lots of little pieces of web, others will have a few, but we all have some. There are people you know at school, or in any of the clubs you go to, Guides, Brownies, Scouts, the Bowling Club, the Golf Club, the Church – all of these relationships form little pieces of web. For some people JG300 has given them lots more pieces, new pieces to this web because they have met and got to know people they didn't know before; for others, existing connections have become stronger; others have renewed connections made years before, but lost when people moved away

It's not just the number of pieces of web that are important, but the quality of these relationships. We can know lots of people, but fall out with them all! What matters is the quality of these relationships. When Jesus was asked by someone what was *the* most important thing of all to do, He spoke about relationships. He said there are 2 things: first of all, love God; secondly, love other people. This is all about relationships. We'll turn them round: loving other people is all about the way we get on with others. The quality of our relationships with others is important, that these are good relationships. We care for people in need. We notice that someone needs help, we are aware of people who are vulnerable, lonely, frightened. We take time to get to know people by name. We speak to people. We care for people, loving others.

The Church has been part of that web, part of that community. The challenge for the Church is how to build good relationships and hopefully the challenge the church has offered the community is the same challenge. But we also recognise the reality of our situation! "Church is a fellowship of sinners before it is a fellowship of saints" (Prior) Church is all about people and our relationships with one another. These words that were written to the Church in Corinth to tell them that they have all the grace they need and all gifts they need, and Paul gives thanks for them. But they were also a people who frustrated him: they fell out with one another, quarrelled, argued, they divided into groups and factions. Yet they were still people whom God loved; their great challenge was 'how do we get on with one another? How do we learn to love others?' We are people who made mistakes & get things wrong & still have to learn to get on well together. This is the challenge for Church & community.

Finally, we love God; I would say that our relationship with God is at the heart of all of this web; God has loved us & is with us always & in every circumstance; the centre of all these other relationships is how we learn to love God with all our heart. We express that in worship, prayer, devotion; it makes us the kind of people that we are. People have stood here for 100 years and more to preach the good news, to pray and worship because of their love for God.

The heart of the community is our relationships: to love God and to love others; it would be my hope and prayer that Juniper Green beyond 300 will be marked by, and continue to be marked by, these qualities!