

# Ministry

An interview with Kit Gunasekera  
Vicar of St. James' Clapham

***What were your 'high points' in 2015 as a minister...and, in contrast, your 'low points'?***

***... 'High Points'***

Leading the funeral service of my father-in-law. I remember thinking afterwards that if I retired there and then, then it would all have been worthwhile...just to be in a position to be able to do that, to have been there for Jill, my wife, and all of the family. It's not that I think I did the perfect service...I look back and think I could have done it differently, but that is all part of the learning experience. It was just a privilege to be that person, that safe person, who could enable the family to grieve. Also Tom was one of the closest people that I've known that has died. It was a real privilege.

Our 'Mission Action Planning' process...and seeing how it's shaping and developing St James'...and the fact that we were able to create teams and I wasn't really needed in most of them. I believe that the more the laity, the church members, take ownership for their own church, the healthier that church is and the more sustainable it is in the future.

The "God conversations", as I call them, that I have had with people saying things like "I prayed for something and this happened". I think that one of the characteristics of a healthy church is stand-alone prayer meetings...it doesn't need to be a lot of people, just a group who want to come together to pray together. It's a highlight for me that we are praying more regularly as a church.

Seeing the children do "Hosanna Rock" at Christmas, telling the Christmas story in such a joyful way...and just seeing the tableau at the end...all the children smiling and the parents taking photographs.

***...and the 'Low Points'?***

Seeing people going through difficult times. Last year we seemed to have a higher number of bereavements, not Church members passing away but loved ones of Church members, or people that we knew passing away.

Seeing people struggle with tremendous pain and illnesses...and bodies which are not working as they should do. But it's a privilege to minister to them at their time of need...and incredibly inspiring to see people who carry their pain, who continue to come to church and make a contribution, and whose faith is still strong.

One of our building projects caused a great deal of difficulty and anxiety to someone, and I felt responsible. I knew that we had to move forward, but couldn't see how...it created a lot of stress.

***What do you find most enjoyable and fulfilling in your role as a minister?***

Talking to people...about God...and what they believe about God. Sharing stories about praying and having one's prayers answered.

Visiting people, particularly people who can't move around any more. One unwell lady recently asked me a question about God: she was concerned God might be angry with her because of her condition. I was able to talk to her, and just knowing that that made a positive difference to her was very fulfilling.

Seeing people come and join the church and become part of it...seeing people using their gifts and making a contribution to St James'...taking more responsibility, owning the mission of St James'.

Seeing the Sunday school tell us what they've been doing every Sunday. Seeing them see St James' as their church; they role model how people can join each other and be part of something together.

***...In contrast, what do you find least enjoyable?***

Moving building projects forward.

The administration and paperwork.

Managing the church's finances...there are times when these can be difficult, particularly given that our church is relatively small and doesn't have a lot of resources.

The transient nature of our borough, with people moving on every year... and thus seeing people become part of our church and then, for very good reasons, them moving on. There's inevitably a sense of disappointment and loss.

***This can appear, at least to an outsider, as quite a frustrating role...for example spending many hours leafleting homes to attract new congregants, with disappointing results...how do you sustain yourself?***

It's the Holy Spirit that sustains me...so the question is how does the Holy Spirit nourish me? Making time to be with God is absolutely vital...last year I had a much more regular time for being quiet with God...for my own personal prayer time...for seeking the counsel of the saints. I really felt the benefit of that.

And the Holy Spirit also strengthens you through other people. Jill, my wife, sustains me...we pray together...she's so wise and has such valuable insights.

I think it's important to not lose sight of what success can be in ministry. Jesus uses farming analogies: of seeds being planted, disappearing out of view, being watered, and then suddenly the plant starts to grow...and even then it's not necessarily useful until a bit later on. A lot of ministry feels like that...even if you don't see the results, just knowing that you're involved in a bigger process is helpful and keeps things in perspective. Obviously, it's nice to see results, and you need to guard against complacency

***This is a relatively low-paid professional role (~£25,000 per annum)...how much do you worry about your personal finances, whether currently or in the future? What financial compromises do you feel you have to make?***

I don't worry that much about it ...although there have been times of worry and when it's been very tight.

We would love to have our own home, for example, but doing that in London is not going to be possible. There have been periods when we've had to take out loans that have required some very conscious decisions about how we would pay it back...which meant 'tightening our belts'. There've been occasions when we've had to go round Sainsbury's with a calculator.

So I wouldn't say that we worry. But in terms of financial independence...of possible aspirations...then this isn't the job for that. But we've made the choice to go down this path.

***How challenging is it being a minister's wife/partner?***

I met Jill in 2006, the year before I was deaconed. So for just about all of the last ten years, we've never really had a full weekend together unless we're on holiday. It's challenging...not having those 2 days when you have time together, when there's nothing tied down and there's freedom. And if there is something quite big happening on the Sunday, then it's a real challenge to switch off on my 'free Saturday' and to be fully present for Jill.

We also live in my workplace...I can't leave my work. I am on call 24/7 so you never feel completely that you've left work. The tools of the trade, my iPhone and PC for example, serve both my personal and work life. The boundaries can get a bit blurred, which isn't always helpful.

Jill is part of St James and makes a big contribution, coming on a Sunday and playing in the worship group. It's obviously not 'work' for Jill, but there is a kind of sense of having a role to play, which is both good and fulfilling but also has its challenges.

So it's challenging.

***In your mind, what are the 3 most important traits of a successful local priest...what do they need to be especially good at.***

Firstly, loving God and obeying Him out of love. You need to be grounded in prayer, your own devotion to God, and being ready to receive spiritual strength.

Secondly, I think ministry is really about people, I feel very strongly about that. It doesn't mean that you have to be an extrovert...as people are made in different ways. But I really think you have to be committed to interacting with people, being out with people, journeying with people. I think every encounter you have with somebody should leave them in a better position; you should go into an encounter to make things better in some way. It's all about sharing God's love.

Thirdly, understanding the people in your parish, where they are coming from, the things that concern them...their contexts. A Church of England incumbent invariably lives in the parish which I think is important. My role involves me being licensed to the parish, not just St James' church. So it's not just about what we do in church on Sundays, it's also about connecting with the community more broadly, including with care-homes and schools.

***If you could change one thing...to enable you to be more successful...what would you change and why?***

There's a moment in preparing a sermon where there's an 'ah-ha'... and then you feel you're in a slipstream, the inspiration comes and you can start to work on it. It becomes exciting and you look forward to preaching it.

I would love to get that 'ah-ha' moment quicker. One of the things I don't enjoy sometimes, actually quite often, is that initial sermon preparation...it can be a real internal struggle. If I could wave a magic wand, I would like to get there quicker.

***What are your ambitions? What would you like to be doing in 10 years time?***

I think I want to be doing what I'm doing now. I think the most important thing for me, as a child of God, is to love God and to do what I think he's calling me to do. That's the vision I want to have and that's the vision I always want to have. So in ten years' time, if that is at the forefront of my mind, then that would be a good place to be.

I think in terms of whether I'm a parish priest or a chaplain, or doing something else, that's clearly important, because what you actually do is of course important, but that's a secondary question to me.

So that's the honest answer. I just want to still love God...to still come before Him and to ask 'what do you want me to do Lord?'