

*Our Vicar, the Revd Rachel Rosborough, had a sabbatical from March – June of 2022. At the end of October she shared some of her broad reflections in a joint service at St Mark's. The readings in the service were Romans 12:9-16a and Luke 19:1-10.*

It is three and a half months since I returned from my sabbatical, or extended study leave as the Diocese prefer it to be called. And I wanted to take the opportunity to share some of my experiences and reflections with you.

I first want to say one more time how grateful I am to have been able to have that time away from day to day ministry. It was an immense privilege and Sam and I went off with so much encouragement and good wishes from the churches and we are thankful.

That being said, I also want to say that I think the sabbatical was much needed. The Diocese tends to allow for sabbatical periods for full time clergy every ten years. Why, you might ask? Plenty of people work hard in other sectors and never get a sabbatical. That is why I recognise it as a privilege, but I also think clergy live with a particular set of circumstances that mean they are often tired, overwhelmed and never feel like the job is done. I love my job as Vicar, I really do, but it rarely stops. Clergy tend to work a six day week including every weekend and many evenings. They tend to live in the place they work. They tend to lurch from joy to sorrow, from the mundane to the exhilarating, from admin to people, and there are always people. And so after fourteen years in full time ordained ministry, I was very ready to step back, ready to have time for family and friends, to take my eyes off the immediate and gaze at the big picture, ready to stop dashing from one thing to another and to pause, to ponder and observe and pray and read and wonder.

So, I want to let you know a few of the things that were personally really good for me, and then share some of the broad reflections I have about the life of the church. I hope that then through PCC and smaller groups, some of those reflections might feed ideas about what is next, about what our priorities should be and what that might look like. So first a few personal things. I had to work out what the difference was between sabbatical and holiday. It was not a three month holiday but it did contain some holiday time within it. So Sam and I enjoyed holiday time on the west coast of Ireland and in Slovenia, both of which were stunningly beautiful as well as lovely relaxing times. The rest of the time was 'sabbatical' and spent reading, praying, visiting churches – more on that in a moment – walking, reflecting, noting, writing and having space. Five weeks in total were in Ireland where Sam's family are and our daughter Phoebe. I read much less than I thought I would but what I read was great – an interesting book on Sabbath, where the writer encourages us Christians to view Sabbath seriously, but not legalistic way, it is not about resting in order to recover from too much hard work and then start up again, it is about joy and delight. God didn't spend the seventh day of creation exhausted from all his labour and needing to catch up before plunging himself into the hard business of being God once again, he took time to delight in that which was good, very good. It was a perfect thing to read at the beginning of an extended sabbath period! In conjunction with that I was reading Brian McLaren's daily reflections book called Seeking Aliveness. It was a good combination as I began a time of having space and time to seek joy, to take delight, to feel alive.

And then there were visits to churches. When you apply for a sabbatical, you have to state what your focus is going to be. Some people write a book, some study something particular in the life of the church, etc. I simply said that I wanted to visit churches! Some said to me before I went that that sounded a bit like a Busman's holiday. Well I guess that is sort of what a sabbatical is, what makes it different to holiday. Since ordination in 2008, I have rarely attended church where I have no responsibilities. In addition, I came to faith in a large very evangelical and quite low church and all the ministry I saw before ordination was of that type. I now have found a very happy home in a much more liturgical setting, a much more traditional sort of 'middle of the road, church of England style and so I wanted to see how others do that! I deliberately chose to attend churches in an Anglican tradition that don't fall on any of the extremes of style, ecclesiology or churchmanship – with one exception.

So,

we managed 14 different churches and services in England, Northern Ireland and Southern Ireland, as well as a few visits just to church or cathedral buildings during the week. I wish I could tell you all the details about the dreadful, in my opinion, Good Friday service in Killarney, the utter joy and delight at the harbour faith Community in Carrickfergus, the amazing Easter Sunday service in Portstewart, the creativity of an all age café church with communion not far from here. I could go into details about each one, but we would be here all day! I will share the odd anecdote in the next few minutes but I have also brought my journal so if after coffee people want to hear a bit more I am happy to share more details. The big thing personally though was that I was relieved to find myself able to genuinely worship in each one – something that if I am honest I was a little concerned about as clergy aren't always very good at simply being in the pew. Even in the one that I described as being poor – I at least knelt in silent prayer and worship for half an hour! And two were something very close to my ideal church (and they were actually quite different).

But for the rest of the time I have this morning, I want to highlight the things that became obviously important to me. Priorities that I think we as churches should tend to. None of these are new things, they aren't in some ways particularly revolutionary or radical, but I think they are things that are very easy to neglect, or to take for granted that we are already doing well. But they were quite profound for me.

The first is welcome. I experienced a real range of experiences of being welcomed, or not, in to churches. One was truly awful. I had read that a village church in Cheshire had started doing a 10.30am all age service every Sunday after their traditional 9am service. So, I decided to go along to the all age service. As I walked up the path ten minutes before the service was due to start, a clergyman was talking to two other men in front of the door to church. I walked up and they looked up at me, but did not speak, smile or move out of the way. I walked into the building and at the other side of the church was about twenty people having coffee together. No-one was on the door, no-one spoke to me, there were no service booklets or information of any kind. I initially thought I must have got it wrong but I noticed someone setting up a projector and screen so I thought maybe the service was on. I sat on the back pew and decided I would see what happened.

I sat for a full ten minutes thinking maybe I should just leave. I didn't and eventually someone rather awkwardly asked me if I was there for the service!! Now the good news bit of this story is that I was glad I stayed, the service was good, and I was warmly welcomed, very warmly welcomed - after the service. But, if I had walked out as my gut told me too, I would never have experienced any of that!

By contrast, I experienced lots of great welcomes, from a church in Stratford where the sidesman simply said Good Morning, I don't think I know your name. So I told him and he said you are very welcome, here is everything you need and please sit anywhere. Perfect. I then sat down and a member of the congregation smiled and said hello and asked if I was a visitor. She too welcomed. That was a great combination – a genuinely warm welcome from the person who was supposed to do that – the sidesman, and a genuinely warm interested person in the congregation.

I was surprised how nervous I felt sometimes, walking up to a strange building where I knew no-one – and I have been going to churches most of my life! A simple welcome and words of instruction really helps. I'm reminded about the one and only time I have been into a betting shop - to place a bet on the Grand National. I walked in utterly bewildered about what I was supposed to do, as I looked round for some clues as to how to behave, two elderly gentleman, who clearly knew betting shops well, came up and asked if I needed help and they showed me what to do. It was really quite profound. I didn't win anything by the way!

So, welcome. I'm not mentioning this because I think we aren't good at this. We are but we could be even better, it is so important. And one of the things I would like us to look at in the coming months is whether we are inadvertently making anyone, or any groups of people, feel unwelcome. Are there accessibility issues, do we give of a message of welcome to all before they even get to the door, what about people who don't behave the way we think they should, or whose presence means we need to do things differently?

Which takes me to the second thing, communication. I was reminded of a conversation I had with a man when I worked on the council helpline many years ago when we lived in Surrey. He rang to complain that his wheely bin hadn't been collected. I explained that due to the recent bank holidays the day had been changed and he said, we no-one told me. I pointed out that it had been in the local papers. I don't read those he said, I said that it was on the council website, I don't look at that he said and that we had sent a letter out with every council tax bill in the borough, I don't read those, he said! I think he thought we should have knocked on every door in the borough with a handwritten note! But actually I don't quite mean that kind of communication, although our weekly emails and websites need to be up to date and giving the correct information – and people need to read them of course!

What I mean is what message, intentionally and unintentionally, are we giving off to people? I was astonished, when trying to find out about churches to attend, how poor many church websites are. Now, I am not saying ours are perfect, but I do think if you go on one of our websites you at least know what time the service is, for example. One church in Northern Ireland made it almost impossible to find out what the service was and what time

it would be at. The closest I got, and this was in March, was finding an old pew sheet on the website dated November that seemed to indicate that services might be at 10am. There was nothing even on the noticeboard outside. And again, this was such a shame because we had a great experience of welcome and hospitality and worship when we did get there. We need to make it clear that the church is here, that it is active and alive and that people can come in!

But there is more to communication than that. I was intrigued as to how the building and the people and things in it communicate a message, often inadvertently. Are we inward looking or outward looking, do we assume everyone knows about churchy things, what is the first thing people see when they come in to the church building? Who is welcome and who isn't? One of the things I have started to do is look at our noticeboards, our children's area if we have one, signs about foodbank, about Ukraine, about what we think about money. Are we telling people about a historic building or an active faith, what is the good news on display and who is it good news for. One lovely experience at a church in Leicestershire was a service that was beautifully inclusive in a number of ways. There was level access throughout but more than that, people in wheelchairs were assisting with communion, children were fully included, someone came and asked us as newcomers whether we needed gluten free bread at communion. On another occasion, I went to an amazing café church communion which was creative and interesting and inspiring but I felt slightly out of place as a person there on my own who didn't know any one – it wasn't really geared up for single people.

So, in addition to how we communicate with each other about things, we need to think about what we are communicating by the way our buildings are laid out, what is in them, what should be in them, what might we be inadvertently saying, what are we modelling in terms of who is visible and included?

And then lastly, I want to talk about Mission. Now again, may be this is obvious, but I am reminded that we are here not to 'keep the church going', or even to grow the church although I would like both of those things to be true, but we are here to share the good news of Jesus Christ and make disciples of all people. I was really pleased when I saw that the lectionary gospel reading today was the story of Zaccheus. Zaccheus was excluded because he couldn't see Jesus, he was excluded because he wasn't very nice to people, he cheated them, and Jesus spots him, and doesn't just welcome him but invites himself into Zaccheus's world. And Zaccheus's encounter with Jesus was life changing and transforming, for him and for the people around him. That is what we are about. We are not about being a club where we enjoy each other and enjoy worshipping God – two excellent things – we are people who should expect to be instrumental in allowing people to encounter Christ, to have their lives transformed and to be good news for others.

So, the welcome, the hospitality, the communication, the things we need to change and do are driven by trying to offer the best place we can to help people find that they are found. To help people hear the good news of the God who loves them. To let people know that they can choose life and life in all its fullness with God, that following Jesus is a really good thing – it is the thing! And that's the job for all of us.

It is not the vicar's job, it is not someone else's job, it is all of our ministry. How we might do that will vary but we are all missionaries. This is about being active in our faith, not just about what we believe.

There is so much more that I could say, but I have probably spoken for long enough. I will be working with each PCC and others to try and use these reflections to formulate something of a vision or plan for what might be next for each of the churches but for now I want to just read those words from Romans that Hannelore read earlier

<sup>9</sup> Let love be genuine; hate what is evil, hold fast to what is good; <sup>10</sup> love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour. <sup>11</sup> Do not lag in zeal, be ardent in spirit, serve the Lord. <sup>12</sup> Rejoice in hope, be patient in suffering, persevere in prayer.

<sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints; extend hospitality to strangers. <sup>14</sup> Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. <sup>15</sup> Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. <sup>16</sup> Live in harmony with one another.

Lets just spend a moment or two in quiet prayer considering what we have heard, asking God to speak to us individually or collectively about what this might mean we need to do.