

Pastors letter December 2020,

About 4 years ago I decided to look for a different ministry opportunity to finish out my 'employed' career, before planning for retirement. I recognise that every clergy person I know, and especially those associated with CCB in Brittany, are very active in volunteer ministry during their retirement. What a blessing that service is to the local parish! Before France I had served in 5 parishes in Ireland and the USA. But none were chaplaincy situations in non-English speaking countries.

During our first year in Brittany, Donna and I were just trying to get a handle on how expats settled into life here and how the church ministered. Every congregation has special rhythms of life and worship on a yearly cycle and we learned how CCB manages Lent, Easter, Harvest, Remembrance, Advent and Christmas. Also how to organise weddings and funerals, annual meetings, Synods, ecumenical activities etc. and the use of borrowed spaces for 3 of our centres and manages the Ploërmel property.

The second year, we had more of a clue and we were able to try out a few different ministries. We did find it difficult to be consistent because of the distances involved and a pattern of being at a different congregation each Sunday. We had expected that the third and last year would be one of having a good understanding of the pulse of the parish and building up the ministry team while going deeper into the faith with the congregations. Then Covid-19 burst into the lives of everyone in the planet! Forty years of ministry have been challenging but predictable, and the 41st year is an apocalypse as my son Ryan described in a recent sermon on Christ the King Sunday (see it online).

At first the wardens, local liaison teams, worship leaders and musicians struggled to preserve as much normal parish life as possible. But with the first extensive lockdown in March to May, that ambition became impossible to realize. Even during the more relaxed period in the summer we were still operating under serious restrictions as a parish. No Brits over on vacation, almost no second homeowners getting over, several members deciding to return to the UK, others staying strictly in or near their homes, and everyone concerned to keep a low profile. We did have a number of outdoor activities in gardens much enjoyed by everyone with the good weather. As autumn approached, we were getting increased numbers in public worship at our various congregations. Most people felt safe with the precautions we were taking. Online worship was also widely appreciated and views went up on Sunday's when in person worship was not possible. Amazingly, many friends in the UK and elsewhere connected with our online services and were delighted to participate with the worship. We learned that committee meetings could be well attended and conducted efficiently through zoom. The churches out west were very good at providing zoom bible studies, and we all enjoyed zoom coffee hour chats either mid-week or after Sunday worship.

As I write this piece (20/11/2020) we still don't know how the restrictions will continue into December. Normally that is our busiest month and the one which gives us the most opportunity for outreach to the English speaking community. I hope and pray that at least by the end of the month restrictions will be relaxed enough to let us join together to celebrate our Saviors birth.

The good news on the horizon is that a number of effective anti-covid vaccines are becoming available early next year. It will be necessary for a large majority of the population to act responsibly and accept the vaccine before the nation feels safe again. Some people are predicting that it will be the summer or autumn of 2021 before Church life can resume our normal rhythms again. Our PCC has noted in our discussions that it is important to carry over into that 'new normal' the lessons we have learned in the struggles of 2020. Perhaps one reason God allowed this pandemic to happen was so that the Church could think outside of its current box, and discover the new ways of operating and ministering in the 21st century.

If you feel depressed because of the isolation and loneliness of lockdown and wonder if it will ever end, then take heart! The holy family was isolated from their home and extended family. Joseph and Mary had to deal with delivering a baby in the unsanitary conditions of a stable, situated in an overcrowded city. Shortly after the delivery, Joseph and Mary had to pack up and run for their lives to Egypt. Egypt was a completely alien country to them with different language and culture. Their original plan had been to return to the familiar comfort of family in Galilee and now they were refugees in a foreign land. Somehow they had to eek out a living for several years until they could sneak back to Galilee. Therefore Jesus understands our feelings of dislocation and isolation.

I am sure that towards the end of his life our Lord Jesus experienced loneliness as his disciples deserted him in his greatest hour of need. Even on the Cross the Father had to turn his back on the Son, as Jesus was to bear the sins of the whole world. 'My God, my God why have you forsaken me?' Matthew 27, he cried from the cross. He knew the reason very well, as the purity and holiness of God cannot regard the ugliness of our sin. It had to be purged by someone and the only one to do that was God himself! 'God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself' 2 Corinthians 5. If you want to know the presence of the living Lord Jesus in your life this Christmas season then say this prayer of commitment used in the popular Alpha course. Then tell a Christian friend or two, about your decision and take positive steps to deepen your faith.

"Lord Jesus Christ, I am sorry for the things I have done wrong in my life (take a few moments to ask his forgiveness for anything particular that is on your conscience). Please forgive me. I now turn from everything that I know is wrong. Thank you that you died on the cross for me, so that I could be forgiven and set free. Thank you that you offer me forgiveness and the gift of your Spirit.

I now receive that gift. Please come into my life by your Holy Spirit to be with me forever. Thank you Lord Jesus, Amen."

As 2020 draws to a close Donna and I are planning our return to family in the USA. I will write a farewell letter for the January edition but for now I wish to thank you for the privilege of ministering among you and hope that we can meet face to face again soon before we depart.

We wish you all a most blessed Christmas and a safe 2021.

La bénédiction de Dieu tout-puissant soit avec vous
Robin