

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

September 2020

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

‘The past is a foreign country, they do things differently there.’

Thus, begins one of my favourite novels, the *Go-Between*, by LP Hartley, that tells the tale of a young boy called Leo growing up in Edwardian Britain. An elderly Leo stumbles across a diary at the beginning of the story and he revisits his memories of one fateful summer that would change the course of his life for ever. Whilst staying at the aristocratic home of one of his school friends in Norfolk; he finds himself drawn inexorably into the role of a secret messenger between two illicit lovers, the high-born Marian and the tenant farmer Ted. The love affair is doomed to end in tragedy and of course it cannot survive because of the social conventions of the day – the reader is drawn into the unfolding disaster and one cannot help but feel pathos for the unwitting Leo whose innocence is shattered through the illicit deception of the adult world. As the elderly Leo confronts these memories he is forced to relive these events and return to a place that is *strange* and *unfamiliar* because it belongs to a different time in history.

Just this last week I’ve had my own opportunity to return to public worship through my involvement in a number of Circuit Welcome Services; a number of which have been conducted ‘in presence’ with all the relevant restrictions in place. In one sense this has been a return to something ‘*strange*’ and ‘*unfamiliar*’ – socially-distanced, masks in place, handwashing and temperature checks, no congregational singing and the inevitable orderly exit without food and refreshments. At one level this is deeply disconcerting and unsettling for it is *not* worship as we know it or indeed as we remember it! However, alongside these feelings I have also detected something *strangely familiar* – there has been a deep sense of joy at simply being amongst the people of God once more in a physical and embodied sense. I have felt moved as I preached and sensed the different ways in which people have responded through body language, eye contact and mood. I’ve been touched as I’ve witnessed genuine warmth and care expressed to people in need of consolation as they entered and left our buildings. If I needed any convincing of the value of being physically gathered together as God’s people, in the presence of God who draws near to us in the life of the Son and the Spirit; then I have certainly seen it in the last few days.

I am writing at a time when many of you will be making your first tentative steps to return to public worship as many of our churches open again throughout September. I recognise that this will be an anxious time for many of you and I fully respect that natural sense of caution particularly as we approach the Autumn. For that reason, I offer the words of this prayer that I have written for the beginning of the new Connexional Year that revolves around the virtues of wisdom, courage and grace – please feel free to use it or reproduce it in whatever way is helpful:

Lord God, as your holy and beloved people, watch over us we pray.

As we emerge from our isolation; grant us wisdom in our relating, courage in our venturing forth and the grace to bear patiently with one another; that with all your Saints, in time and eternity, we may rejoice and be glad. Amen.

Peace and Blessing, Julian