

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

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Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I am writing this letter on the first day of the New Year and I suspect that for many of us our festive celebrations and our marking of the New Year will have been somewhat muted in character given the circumstances we find ourselves in. Just a week before Christmas we discovered that many of our domestic and personal plans for the holiday period had to be hastily reimagined in the light of the new restrictions and since then the whole area of the East Anglia District has been moved into the highest tier of restrictions (tier 4). From the perspective of public health, it is easy to see why these measures became necessary particularly given the existence of a new and virulent strain of COVID-19 and its obvious spread in the eastern region. Whilst recognising the necessity of these measures, we need to also recognise the sense of loss, frustration, and pain that this brings to many people particularly those who would normally be with extended family over this period.

It is perhaps a reminder to us all that we live with very real *expectations* about our life and experience; particularly at this time of the year when we gather to celebrate Christmas and mark the turning of the Year. The reason why the current restrictions are so difficult is because we all have our *expectations* about how we want to celebrate Christmas and New Year, who we want to celebrate it with and for how long! However, we are still living with great uncertainty and even now, with rising infection rates, a new variant of COVID and the massive logistical exercise of a mass vaccination programme; it is difficult to say exactly when things will return to normality in 2021. I think for these reasons I found myself feeling rather ambivalent about the turning of the Year – it is likely to be a difficult year as we struggle with the arduous task of recovering a familiar way of life whilst continuing to suppress the virus and hold out for our turn in the vaccine queue!

As people of faith there is another virtue that is profoundly important and relevant to us currently and that is 'hope' – and I want to suggest that this is a time to embrace and embody 'hope'. In fact, to rediscover 'hope' might be the most effective alternative to the seduction of *expectations* – however well-meant or realistic they might be. The problem with *expectations* is that they are very often generated by us or the well-meaning people around us – and as we all discover at some point in our lives, they are not always fair or realistic. As a theological virtue 'hope' seems to belong to a different order of things – properly understood it grounds us in the promises of a Covenant God who is and remains committed to us in Creation and Salvation. In the face of human experience, we affirm our desire to entrust ourselves and our future into the hands of a generative and transformative God; the God whom we encounter in the grace and vulnerability of the Christ-child.

Donald Eadie makes this very point in one of his published works:

'Hope liberates us from expectation. It is centred in the endlessly creative power of God to generate new things, to draw life out of death. To live in hope rather than expectation is to live wholly in the present moment. It is to look to the future as an unexpected gift.'

Perhaps 2021 is a year to revise some of our deeply held expectations and determine to entrust ourselves more fully to the hope-giving and hope-filled God of Jesus Christ,

Peace and Blessing, Julian