

October 2016

Dear Friends

The Aberfan disaster happened 50 years ago this month. For those who were alive then and recall the awful moment, the name of that Welsh coal-mining village is sufficient, but for those of us who were not, we read, and struggle to take in, a ghastly story of a predictable man-made situation that saw 144 lives lost in a few fearful moments, as a tip of coal waste extract weighing many thousands of tons became unstable and slid downhill at speed engulfing a row of mining cottages and a village school where the last day before the half term holiday was just getting underway. The daily ritual of singing All thing bright and beautiful was delayed from the start of the day, so that it could send the children into their week off school, but it was not sung that day, or for many days afterwards.

144 lives were lost in that village, on 21st October 1966, 116 of them children. It's hard to imagine the devastating experience of loss for a local and indeed close-knit community whose lives were woven together in the landscape of the valley, and in the industry that sustained the community.

It's the sort of news story which can cause us to doubt the goodness of God, and yet as the official enquiries revealed, it was in fact a story to leave the neutral observer (if such there can be) struck dumb at the prevalent attitudes of blind complacency and misplaced confidence shown by the senior management of the coal industry. Worse was to follow as the government of the day went on to raid the charitable fund established by donations from people around the country and indeed around world, in order to offset the costs of removing the coal waste tips. Many years later, but after persistent campaigning, the money was repaid, and indeed some years after that, the difference in the value of the amount raided with due recognition to the passage of time was calculated, and an appropriate sum paid over.

A local community's heartbreaking and devastating loss is paired in my mind with the ongoing remembrance of the events of the two world wars, and in particular to the centenary of the Battle of the Somme. Enduring for some 140 days between July and November, it was the first major offensive battle of World War 1, and saw casualties almost beyond number. On the first day of battle alone, and still regarded as the British Army's worst day, nearly 20000 lives were lost, with the total loss of life on the allied side approaching half a million (and an estimated 1.3million lives lost during the four and a half months in all). That the course of the battle saw an advance of the frontline by six miles is staggering, although the victory may be considered decisive in the outcome of the whole war (not least bringing the Americans into the allied force).

That's the sort of news story to cause us to doubt the goodness of God, and yet let us remember that this is, at a simplistic level, about the inability of human beings to get along with each other. And how we have seen that scenario unfold time and time again, not least at the moment in South Sudan, in Iraq and perhaps above all in the misery of the population of Aleppo in the north of Syria. And we seem unable to learn from it, and to do any better the next time we are faced with people who are just a bit different for one reason or another.

The goodness of God is frequently hard to see in the events and stories of humankind, but surely it is evident in the cross of Jesus Christ, where the cruelty and complacency, where the hatred and the indifference, where the apathy, resistance and prejudice of our human hearts is taken up in the suffering of Jesus, so that we can be released – set free for a better way of living; and we can be redeemed - your life and mine, individually valued and worth every investment that God has made in us; and we can be forgiven from all the wrong things that we have said, thought and done.

Our darkness is touched by the presence of Christ's light, our emptiness is filled by the riches of his love, and our loneliness encounters the one who is fully present in every moment of our lives, the triumphs and the tragedies, the ups and the downs, everything. And in it all, the beaten and bruised, crucified Christ of Calvary is then raised to new life as the Lord of unconquerable love to give us JOY, PEACE and HOPE!  
HALLELUJAH!!

Andrew

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September 2016

Dear Friends

At various points during my three months of sabbatical leave this summer, I was pitched up near the water, be that the coasts of Essex, Somerset and Pembrokeshire, or by lakes in Wales (Llyn) and Scotland (Loch!). Altogether indeed I spent 35 nights under canvas, and the proximity of the natural world with all its wild and raw-ness, was a real part of the tonic of the experience, honestly!

Sometimes the water was amazingly rough. In seven years I've not seen the Colne estuary in Essex as choppy as it was back in May, and the County Sailing Week hasn't ever, in its forty year history(!), had to cancel three days of sailing in one week due to the strength of the wind, which was simply unrelenting.

Thankfully the camping field was rather more sheltered! On Loch Earn in August we again saw some very strong winds, without ever having to cancel the sailing (although some of the novices we had out in the boats might have been wishing we had!). It was interesting to learn later that friends who were due to be sailing in a yacht on a loch just 60 miles to the north of our location were actually prevented from leaving the marina due to the stormy conditions!

But sometimes the water was amazingly calm. I think with a sustaining sense of stillness in my spirit, even four months later, of a string of early mornings in June in North Wales when there was not only no wind, but Llyn Tegid was literally mirror-calm, with the trees and mountains beyond reflected perfectly on the surface. The only thing to disturb the water was an early morning kayaker out for a paddle, ie me(!), and at one point I did feel a little bit sorry for anyone else who had come down to the lake before 7am to witness the absolute stillness! Loch Earn was also very calm some days, such that indeed, on one or our days off, we were able to try our hand at water-skiing, although without too much success! But that's another story!

The wave conditions, especially on an inland stretch of water, are totally determined by the wind, its direction and particularly its strength. And both during and since the sabbatical such experiences, stormy and total calm – and sometimes something very enjoyable in between! – have caused me to reflect on the experience of God's wind, his Spirit, in our lives. Sometimes we find ourselves completely, it can seem, at the mercy of wind and wave in the stormy experiences of life, and yet God's spirit is there, offering us grounds for confidence and peace of mind even in the midst – I think of Jesus who is asleep in the boat as the disciples fear for their lives. Sometimes life is wonderfully calm, and the weather of life can even be absolutely balmy, if rarely, but perhaps we need the stirring of God's spirit to wake us from our stillness, so we can catch in our sails the breath of God, to find again the breeze of God that will move us along at his bidding and in his time.

I recognise that not everyone 'gets' sailing and that my personal enjoyment of sailing, with such as its dual senses of freedom and control, is not something that everyone shares. However during October I am taking a group of Baptist minister colleagues who have not sailed before for a taster dinghy sailing experience within the programme of our ministers' conference! You can either pray for them, or pray for me, please! But surely in our life together, and our living with God's spirit blowing within us, amongst us and through us, to motivate us or perhaps to calm and cool us down, to empower us and to inspire us (quite literally to put God's breath into us), there is a common opportunity for us all to share, and a common experience to bring us together, and to move us forwards together too.

As Paul puts it in his wonderful letter to the Christians of Galatia, "Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit" (Gal 5,25). Now there's an instruction to follow, an experience to live by, and indeed a prayer for us to share in these days.

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May 2016

Dear Friends

The story is told of a nobleman who lived in a certain mountain village in continental Europe several centuries ago. He was a wise and generous man, who wondered what sort of legacy he might leave for the fellow residents of his community. He decided to build a church. No one else saw the complete plans for the new building and it was only open to view when the construction work was completed. The local people finally gathered with bated breath, and upon entering and after exploring, how they marvelled at the design and the beauty of this new church. But then someone asked: "But where are the lamps? How will it be lighted?" The nobleman pointed to some empty brackets on the walls, and then he gave to each household a lamp with the instruction that they were to light it and bring it to the church each time that they came to worship, placing the lamp in its bracket. "Each time you are here", he said, "the area where you are seated will be lighted. And each time you are not here, that area will be dark." He concluded, "This is to remind you that whenever you fail to come to church, some part of God's house will be dark".

It may seem to some to be a strange tale to recount as your minister takes a sabbatical and is then away from the middle of this month until the end of August. I like to think that you will miss me, a little at least, but my prayer is that the lights of God's house will not be dimmed because I am not here, and then indeed I dare to pray that the lights of God's house will not be dimmed because you too are not here, holidays excepted!

The sabbatical is a time for refreshment for both congregation and for pastor, and my hopes are for us all as church to be refreshed and renewed as well as for myself to enjoy some time to rest, to read and "to recreate". The programme for my sabbatical is given again this month, as it was included in last month's magazine, but the programme for your sabbatical is also emerging. One of the opportunities for the church comes as over these weeks the Gospel of Mark takes centre stage on Sundays, and may that Gospel continue to reveal to us - and indeed to reveal through us to others - something more of Jesus' identity and his purpose, and what it means for us to be his followers in today's world.

The planning for this, my third sabbatical in 22 years of ministry, has been as thorough as ever, and the life of the church continues to be in safe hands with the deacons and those who are supporting this church from beyond our life together. Please have a word with your link deacon if you have any anxieties or concerns.

One of the exercises I am planning to tackle before the sabbatical begins is to pray around and across the church family, and to do so by visiting each of the front doors of our church family on a single day, and indeed to do so riding my bike between every home! I can't promise to ring on each doorbell, or to speak to each person, but as a way of celebrating our togetherness, I intend to visit each and all, and throughout that day to spend moments in prayer for you and yours. If anyone has a specific prayer request, you are welcome to let me know beforehand, as indeed I would encourage you at any time to share your prayer requests with us in church.

Renewing our prayer life is something that we have been exploring of late, and is something for each of us to continue to explore during and beyond the sabbatical opportunity that we all have this summer. In the days after Jesus' resurrection, the disciples were together constantly in prayer (Acts 1, 14), and it was when the disciples were all together in one place (and we may fairly assume they were praying as well as anything else) that God's Spirit came, the moment when the church was born.

The story of the nobleman's gift to his neighbours of a new church is a beautiful one, and the responsibility still falls on each of us to bring our lamp to church each time we gather for worship, with each of us then our own part of the answer to the question, "How will it be lighted?" But God's gift of his Spirit, birthing the Church as the new community of God's people, is the really significant one, with each of us charged to share the light of Christ wherever we go in a dark world. For that task, and indeed in the power of that Spirit, let us together burn brightly now and always.

With my thanks for your prayerful support during my sabbatical, and with my prayers for you during your own sabbatical opportunity too,

In Christ,

ANDREW

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April 2016

Dear Friends

Celebrating Easter – early or late - gives us such an opportunity for joy and hope, inspiration and encouragement, doesn't it! We are an Easter people, with new life through Christ and in Christ on offer for us all year round, as well as on a single festival occasion. And so I have long sensed that it would be good to designate a season post-Easter when we can go on reflecting on and rejoicing in all that the resurrection of Jesus means for us and for the world; truly Jesus Christ is risen from the dead – It's good news! It's the best news indeed!

Of course in one sense that post-Easter season is already given to us, with 40 days taking us from Easter to Ascension Day, and/or with 50 days taking us from Easter to Pentecost. And what great themes we then have for these weeks! Just as in Lent during the run-up to Holy Week and Easter, we reflect, often movingly and helpfully, on the ministry of Jesus on earth, which leads him to the cross and to the empty tomb, so let us journey on beyond Easter and in the run-up to Pentecost, considering the joy and the power of the Easter story, the transformational encounters of those who meet with the risen Jesus, the sense of building purpose and kingdom fulfilment that grows in its anticipation of all that God is doing, as well as the sense of prayerfulness and peace that the disciples develop in their life together. And then let the fiery truth and dynamic energy of Pentecost loose, as God's Spirit drives us out from our own locked upper rooms, from our own safe spaces inside the church, and we find ourselves out in the streets, sharing the Gospel with others, even to the ends of the earth and in every language under heaven.

The Baptist Union and our Central Baptist Association are tapping into this same flow when they challenge us to take up "40 days of Daring Greatly". Daring Greatly has been part of the President's theme this year, and by the time you read this, we will have given some time at church meeting to discussing, and hopefully discerning and deciding, how to move forwards on this. There is scope for you and me to take up personal challenges in these 40 days, and there is scope for us as church together to take up corporate challenges too. Our Pentecost event as Churches Together, Party in the Square (Sun 15 May), is a great opportunity to express our resolve to live out the resurrection, to share God's blessing generously with others, indeed to dare greatly. So do please get involved with your own ideas and contributions! Again, we intend inviting all those who have been to Messy Church before to invite a "plus one" to our next Messy Church event on 14th May; 1+1 could be a friend, or 1+1 could be another family! A little beyond the 40 days as such (depending on which of her birthdays you take!), we're also looking at an opportunity to celebrate the 90th birthday of Her

Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, and to celebrate her service, but also to share the faith that, in her own words, has sustained her truly remarkable and record-breaking reign.

But what might your 40 days of Daring Greatly look like? An opportunity to do something you have never done before, in reaching out to a neighbour, in sharing an act of kindness, in making a donation you never have previously, or perhaps even in a step of faith – joining one of our prayer groups, or a Bible Study home group, or .. or .. or ..!?! Go on! Try it! Have a go and somebody else to try it too! But don't leave it to someone else to do it first! And please don't miss out!

We don't know what the 40 days of Daring Greatly will bring us, or where it will lead us. But how this then wonderfully reflects the experience of the disciples after that first Easter, as surprise after surprise unfolds, as wonder after wonder is made known, and as they are transformed forever because Jesus Christ is risen from the dead. Surprises? Wonders? Transformation? Here?! Because Jesus Christ is alive today still! Yes, and Why not?! Amen & Hallelujah indeed!

With Easter greetings, and with prayerful best wishes, in Christ our risen Lord,

ANDREW

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March 2016

Dear Friends

Easter is early this year. I have said it myself, and heard others saying it! You see, with the date of Easter Sunday falling on 27 March, it's getting on for as early as Easter can be. We will have to wait until 2035 to see Easter celebrated earlier than this year's date, or perhaps we do better to recall 2008 (when it was the earliest that any of us alive then are going to witness!). Furthermore I certainly cannot think of a year when the school holidays called the Easter holidays are separate from the actual festival called Easter, such that schools are back for four days in class after Easter before the fortnight off!

The variable date of Easter has caused the Archbishop of Canterbury to call for consideration again of the suggestion to fix the date of Easter, to prevent it coming late, or coming early. And it's interesting to reflect on the motive, as well as to consider how likely it might be to overturn the ancient pattern that undergirds the date of Easter, and then of course it will be interesting to share the conversation about when the fixed date of Easter should be! One regularly called for is the Sunday nearest to 19th April (as this is the most frequently occurring date in the amazing and precise 5.7 million year repeating pattern for the date of Easter that we currently enjoy!).

But whether Easter is early or indeed Easter is late, I am also struck that we rarely if ever speak of Easter coming on time!

The purposes of God in his outreaching and embracing love as revealed above all in Jesus reached their highpoint in the story of the first Easter. The events of Holy Week – the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, the cleansing of the temple, the last supper, the agonising of Gethsemane, the mockery of justice in arrest and trials, the humiliation and suffering of Jesus and more yet - lead us to Good Friday, to the cross of Calvary where Jesus gave his life and died for us and for all the world. After two days of silence – at least for the first disciples, although we at best observe them with bated breath - on the third day the risen Christ greets us, the stone is rolled away, his tomb is empty, the grave clothes are folded up. Jesus is alive! Hallelujah!

And all this happens, as Paul writes, "at the right time". Not late, not early, but at the right time. Indeed not when we were ready for it, not when we were worthy of it, not when we had determined the date for it, but when we were powerless, when we were still sinners, God demonstrated the extent of his love in this way – Christ died for us, and, what's more, beyond death we are saved through his life (see Romans 5, 1-11 for his full text!).

Easter is early this year, or so some say. But whatever date it is celebrated, it is my prayer that we will allow the everyday truth of the Easter story to go deep within our faith and lives, that we will encounter the risen Christ for ourselves, and that, like disciples on a road of old, we will know our hearts burning within us as he goes with us.

Christ is risen – Hallelujah!

With greetings, love and prayers this Easter time, in Christ

Andrew

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January 2016

Dear Friends

For our church text in this new year, we have turned again to the Psalms of the Old Testament, the collection of hymns and prayers of the people of God before and since the coming of Christ, but at first glance it might feel that we are taking a step backwards. We have been this past year with the call on God's people to offer our witness to God's mighty acts, each age group to all the rest, old to young, and young to old. It's been about our boldness to share and to speak, to tell and to commend. And in the midst of much that 2015 included, what opportunities there have been.

Psalm 67, 1 might then seem to be taking us inwards and almost backwards, expressing not so much our boldness to commend God to others, as seeking God's blessing more or less for ourselves:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us.

I believe that we will discover that in fact it's a much richer verse than simply asking God to be good to us, as for instance the rest of this short Psalm reminds us. We seek God's blessing, but only in order to be a blessing to others. It's tempting therefore to observe that we should be treading very carefully in making this verse our church text! The notes of 'Imagine and Dare' that we have considered more recently will surely continue to be the signs of our faith in Christ. Are you ready?

There's surely a season of change underway, and I reflect with both sadness and thankfulness the decisions rightly taken at the end of last year to stop both Breakfast Bar and TFA (Friday's youth club). Breakfast Bar was into its eighth year (and would have been on its way towards its 1500th session this coming term!), but the young people who had been more or less regular stopped coming - with one notable exception - and we couldn't find ways to re-connect with those whose need for a breakfast before school was the reason that we started this initiative. But - with thankfulness - what conversations have been shared, what relationships built, and indeed what generous commitment has been shown by the various team members who have been ready by soon after 7.30am to serve a breakfast each school day.

But let us also see whether new avenues will open up, and new possibilities emerge – and please continue to be prayerful as our youth-worker post is currently being advertised. Let God's blessing yet produce a harvest as sign of his goodness towards us and others in this as well as surely in other ways.

Let us also understand at the outset that Psalm 67 (incl v1) is a prayer, is a shared prayer indeed. And it would be great to see the opportunities for shared prayer being explored and developed in our life together during 2016, in for instance our gatherings for prayer (incl 2nd and 3rd Saturday mornings each month), and in the use of the prayer corner immediately after Sunday worship. It's the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity during this month, and on Monday 1 February we will be sharing in the BMS Day of Prayer as we have before. Do please be part of these occasions and opportunities, even if you never have before!

It is also hoped that together we will respond positively to the invitation to read the Bible together again this year. There have in fact been a couple of years off since the Essential 100 & Essential Jesus schemes, but in 2016 we want to read through the whole of the New Testament. We are proposing and encouraging a scheme called 5x5x5 – which invites people to give five minutes (or so) to read one chapter of the New Testament, on five days during each week, and to use five tactics for digging a little deeper into a week's readings. Will you join us and join in?

And so we start a new year with a new Bible verse, a new church text, and may it be true as the year begins, as well as throughout the coming twelve months:

May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face shine on us. (Psalm 67, 1)

With my prayerful greetings and best wishes, in Christ

ANDREW