

Dear Friends,

I wonder if you have been reading your Presidential Prayer Card this year. It gives the itinerary of the President of Conference, Rev Richard Teale, and the Vice President of Conference, Mrs Carolyn Lawrence. The idea is that knowing their itinerary, we can pray for them in their key year as Connexional leaders. My goodness, what a year they have been selected for! I guess they will have mixed feelings about the gatherings and travels they had looked forward to, but which have been made virtual. In leadership, as in life, we are often defined by situations outside our control, and our careful responses to the challenges we face.

The text on the prayer card is very poignant: Isaiah 43: 18,19. ⁸"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland." This is indeed a poignant text for the present. As someone who has travelled around most of my life, I realise that I have to try to adapt to the place where God has placed me at each moment in time. I was born in Canada, but I started school in Glasgow before moving to Bournemouth where I grew up. Following 3 years studying in London, there came 3 years in the North West, a period in Italy, and some time in Worcestershire. Four years in the East End of London led to 16 years in the North West again, 10 years in Hampshire, 5 years in the Black Country and now leafy Surrey. In each place the dialect is different, the politics are different, the church culture is different, and the local traditions and lore are different. In each location I have tried to adapt and be enriched by the new experience, for each community has its own gifts to offer. At each stage of the journey I have had to decide what to pack and what to discard, what to take and what to leave behind. And that has included both physical objects and cultural norms. There have been both costs and benefits to the process.

In a sense growing in maturity is a little like that. Things change. Attitudes shift. Even language and accents evolve. Many of the celebrities of our youth are either deceased, disgraced, forgotten or frail. Watching the news, we might tire of the cyclical nature of politics and be tempted to shout "I told you so!" at the screen when our leaders acknowledge that errors have occurred. But more than anything, decisions must be made as to how to gracefully yield to the counsel of the years. What of the past can we cling on to and what must we discard? When younger generations are determined to repeat the mistakes of

their grandparents' generation we must smile benignly and let them learn from experience. Remembering the days of crowded chapels and Sunday Schools is bittersweet. There is much wisdom in the book of Isaiah: ⁸"Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past. ¹⁹See, I am doing a new thing! Now it springs up; do you not perceive it? I am making a way in the wilderness and streams in the wasteland."

There are times of course, when we might cry out to God to do a new thing. And actually, amidst the pains of lockdown I believe that God is doing a new thing. Our lives, our attitudes, our behaviour have all changed and who can say if things will return to the old ways? What I do recognise is that God is teaching us to do things in new ways, and He is forcing us as a Church to adapt much quicker than we usually do.

November 22nd, the Sunday before Advent, is Stir Up Sunday. Traditionally it is the day to mix up your Christmas puddings. The Book of Common Prayer collect for the day begins, "*Stir up, we beseech thee, O Lord, the wills of thy faithful people*". It is a prayer to move us on from being fixated on where we have come from and rejoice in where God is leading us. Like Christmas puddings it might be said that the church is comprised of mixed fruits and the occasional nut! Whatever the constituents of each local church, the stir up prayer has something to say to us all.

I wonder what the President and Vice President of Conference have had to lay down for their year of office. I wonder what they have had to take up. There will be things they miss and things they relish. As we pray for them and the wider Connexion, we might also pray for ourselves, that we might not become too comfortable with where we have come from and what we have been, but by God's grace we may be willing to tread the path God is making for us through the wilderness. As we approach the strangest Advent of my lifetime, may God stir us to recognise what He is doing in us, through us and for us.

May God bless you,

Keith

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