

Parting Thoughts

From the School of Prayer 9th July:

An important feature of our spiritual life at St Nicolas' is what we call the daily office. Now that's the first problem. Clergy know what this is, but for others it's a bit of a mystery. The daily office is psalms, readings and prayers set for each day according to the celebrations of the Church through the year. In the Anglican Book of Common Prayer that was simplified into Morning and Evening Prayer. I can remember how in the sixth form at school I started to 'say' them. It made me feel that I was already becoming like the priest I wanted to model myself on. Actually that's one important aspect of the office, using it is an identification with the whole worshipping body of the Church. Hopefully we also start to share its 'character', to become more prayerful, more 'worshipful' if you like, in how we are as individuals, in how we live.

As a student in a theological college with other trainee priests experiencing the daily office was part of what was called our formation. We had to be in chapel at an early hour for Morning Prayer and a time of meditation every weekday, and then back for Evensong. I loved singing the psalms to plainsong chants (and still do). But it also got boring, like for example on the 15th evening of each month when we had to plough through the 73 verses of the psalm set for that day!

I'm now looking back over my 42 years in parish ministry and realising the centrality of this daily praying of the office. I was taught to keep in mind that bit of canon law which tells us: "Every clerk in Holy Orders is under obligation, not being let by sickness or some other urgent cause, to say daily the Morning and Evening Prayer", and in church, after first "tolling the bell" – "to sustain the corporate spiritual life of the parish and the pattern of life enjoined upon ministers".

But very soon I shall no longer be a parish priest, and there'll be no bell to toll! What then? Well, I find that the period of the lock-down has led me into a different approach to the daily office. In the first few days I felt all at sea. We couldn't go into church, but I had to make my study a place of prayer (and ad hoc tv studio). I carefully said the office – in its fullest form – and enjoyed its all-embracing framework to re-structure those weirdly empty days.

But as well as the daily office I also became rigorously committed to the daily *walk*. And I think it was this that made me start to feel differently. Falling into the routine of the same route each day, I walked up St Catherine's Hill to the chapel, down to the river, and over into Shalford Park. I watched the trees come into bud and then full leaf, and suddenly everything was so green. Every day the sky was different, sometimes full of incredible cloudscapes, but then days and long days of the deepest clear blue. I felt it was doing me good and that my spirit was being nourished. Week after week, the same paths, but I didn't get tired of them. The very routine was grounding. My walks each day made me feel part of all the life around me, and it made for a space in which to breathe. I started to need the daily office to fit in with that: to enhance that spaciousness, savouring the richness of its words, in a daily pattern that was simple and regular, and which could support times in the day just to stop and breathe.

Two things have come in to refresh the daily office for me. One was poetry. The other was the practice of mindfulness. Poetry I discovered a love for way back in O-levels and thanks to a few inspirational English teachers. I discovered mindfulness as a theological student being attracted to what we call the contemplative tradition in Christianity. Then later on I explored silence in a doctoral thesis. This led to an interest in the Quakers, attracted by *their* simplicity and openness. As you know, more recently I became a Quaker. But during lockdown I've also found that I can't cope with two forms of religion (one is difficult enough!) and that I'm better off just adapting in my own way to the Anglicanism that I'm rooted in. But mindfulness, well, a few years ago I took a course, 'Be Mindful'. In the counselling training which I've just finished mindfulness has now become for me both a resource I would sometimes share with clients, and in my own practice of it a way to prepare for each counselling session, and use for my own self-reflection, and – very much – for my self-care. Mindfulness enables you to listen to your body and to be more accepting of the whole of life as it is, so to be less judgemental – of ourselves, of others, and of how things just *are*. Essentially I'd say it's enabling us to actually experience the unconditional love that is our God.

The poetry supports the daily office, and the daily office supports the mindfulness. Let me explain. Traditionally each office would have a hymn near the beginning. That's where I have a poem. I don't feel it has to be one with a religious theme. I find that poetry opens my mind with my bodily awareness. At the moment I'm using the poetry of Mary Oliver. A poem at the start of the office helps me appreciate the freshness and power of words. The trouble with the psalms and much of the Bible is that it's become so familiar. The words just wash over me. But if I read a poem first then I'm more able to appreciate the poetry in the psalms that follow. Also, I'm aware at some level of my being of feeling uncomfortable with the traditional prayers and readings because they force the assumption that this is how I believe too. I'm not saying I don't, but I know that I am swirling with different

ways of interpreting our experience. Poetry encourages this, and nourishes our spirits through allowing for a full engagement of our imagination and human creativity. Mark Oakley's book, 'The Splash of Words' sees poetry that way too. In an interview* about his book he said:

God is a poet and the tragedy is that the troubles begin when people of faith become cursed with literalism, simmering down the richness, the ambiguities, the resonances into something black and white and then often weaponised – those biblical bullets that we fire off. "Nothing true can ever be said about God from a defensive posture", wrote Marilynne Robinson.

The mystic Meister Eckhart once said that God is like a person hiding in the dark who occasionally coughs and gives himself away. Poetry is where I hear the cough, where my own snoring through life is interrupted, where the splash makes me jump and freshens and puzzles, just like those words "follow me" still do. Writing this book was my way of trying to celebrate the truth that I have come to believe very deeply that God is in this world as poetry is in the poem.

During the lockdown I was prompted to renew my commitment as a Companion of Julian of Norwich. I let this lapse some years ago when I became a Quaker. But the recent space for reflection brought me to realise that Julian's vocation was to good listening – to the world in which she lived, and the people who came to her window, listening deeply every day to God in the Mass and in her keeping of the Church's daily office. And I realised that this mirrored my own sense of vocation for the time ahead. I hope to find some opportunities to practice and develop the counselling I have been training for, and that the basis for it can be a mindful way of life and with the daily office to stabilise that, the time set aside for it acting as a marker to bring me back to myself, back to an awareness of the mystery of God in the here and now. Tim Stead in his book 'Mindfulness and Christian Spirituality' describes saying the Office mindfully:

My mind drifts, I notice it has drifted, I come back to this word on this page – the words themselves constantly bring me back to the present moment ... the Office can be ... a way of waking up and returning to the present moment.

In her recent presentation for us from the work Oakleaf are doing Jen Clay said that she thought what was most important at the moment was just to create some space daily or weekly to consider our own mental health and that of our loved ones. So the Office as a regular stopping for mindful awareness also makes a further opportunity for self-reflection. Many thoughts *will* come into our minds which we can just notice and not get caught up in but let float on by. Other thoughts we might want to gently stay with, focus on, and feel our way into a better understanding of. So this morning, for example, I found myself thinking about my counselling supervisor asking me yesterday about how I experienced endings. From my first moments of mindfulness practice this morning that led into some self-reflection on, well, how I experienced attachment to my mother in early years, how I get a deep sense of emotional security in my marriage, and a lot of affirmation from the years of church ministry, and I reflected on how *all* that makes for how I am experiencing ending here now.

Saying the daily office together with regular times for mindfulness practice is a discipline, sometimes I do feel bored, tired, or just can't be bothered. But I don't see prayer as just what we do when we sit quietly, close our eyes, and try to get religious ideas into our minds. I see it rather as a holistic living of the spirit that infuses each and every moment – and both mindfulness and poetry can very much help with that.



<https://www.bemindfulonline.com/>

Sermon for 12th July:

One of the things that became harder to buy at the beginning of the lockdown period were vegetable seeds. I know this because I thought I might try to grow a few herbs. It would occupy the time – which I suddenly had – and it might help to take my mind off the awful things going on in the world. Some extra flavouring for the meals that my wife, Jacky, and I had time to cook and enjoy together would be nice. As basic items started to disappear from the supermarket shelves maybe we would all need to become more self-sufficient anyway? I do enjoy gardening and I notice how good it feels to have your hands in the soil. Perhaps I sensed the need to be literally 'earthed' in order to cope with these strange times? Sitting in the garden and on daily walks it was suddenly very reassuring to see natural life continuing normally while ours was paused. The trees came out in leaf and then summer flowers. In the evenings the foxes played at the bottom of our garden and walking along the river I came across a stork silently standing and we stood together for some long moments.

Seeds are the theme of the gospel passage today. They knew a lot more about them around Nazareth where Jesus was brought up than I do. The ravines in the slopes and the rocky ground were suitable for clusters of trees whose olives were gathered, crusted with large grinding stones, pitted, and pressed for oil. The fields on the slopes could grow various grains – wheat, barley, and millet whose chaff was separated on threshing floors

with winnowing. The alluvial soil south of the village was sufficiently fertile for vegetables and legumes. Terraces built and irrigated along the steeper slopes maximized the grain harvest and could also support fig and pomegranate trees. An adequate water source was located at the western edge of the village, now called the Well of the Virgin, and it trickles along the length of the village, giving people the ability to grow their own food in small patches of ground.

So it was natural for Jesus to illustrate spiritual growth by reference to their constant need to work the land. But I wonder how unusual it was for him to see religion as a developmental process? Surely religion in 1st century Palestine must have been a fixed aspect of the social environment. There were strict dietary regulations. There was a local synagogue but mothers led prayers in the home every day for their families. Religion was focused on the Temple in Jerusalem and we read about Jesus going there with Mary and Joseph and then at crucial points in his life. With the Roman occupation and all its consequent uncertainties this religious framework must have been a great source of security and stability. Whatever was going on around them, however threatening, they kept the cycle of festivals and observances in exactly the way it had been laid down. So when it came to Passover they did what they believed Moses had told them always to repeat. Like it says in the book of Exodus 12:26-27: 'And when your children ask you, "What do you mean by this observance?" you shall say, "It is the passover sacrifice to the Lord, for he passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt, when he struck down the Egyptians but spared our houses." ' And the people bowed down and worshipped.' But Jesus didn't just bow down and find solace in the prescribed formularies. He discerned the potential for spiritual growth. For him the spiritual life was a flowing stream of living water – not just to be safely dammed up in ceremonial pools. No doubt it was this attitude that got him into trouble.

In the contemporary Church of England there's a strong emphasis on growth and renewal. The shared vision in our own diocese is that of 'Transforming Church, Transforming Lives' with twelve aspirational goals. At its heart, we say, our vision is about growth. But I wonder if it isn't growth but on *our* terms? Are we really prepared to meet people in our society where they actually are? Can we enter into their questionings and share their despairs and empathize with their escapism and evasion of all that? Or are we really talking about something more like revival, praying for God's blessing on our Church Development Plans to *build back* the Church? Now that I'm about to retire I look back and worry that for most of the time I've been part of this retrenching activity. Obviously it's not all bad. I'm sure Jesus loved the religion of his family with their deep and rich spiritual culture. But *he* saw it as potential and he felt the spirit of it flowing through their veins.

For the last three years I've been training in the ways of counselling and psychotherapy as what I hope to be doing after 'retirement'. My modality, as we call it, is the person-centred approach. This was developed by Carl Rogers. Rogers' recognized the potential for growth as inherent in our human condition. For example, he famously told this story:

I remember that in my boyhood, the bin in which we stored our winter's supply of potatoes was in the basement, several feet below a small window. The conditions were unfavourable, but the potatoes would begin to sprout — pale, white sprouts, so unlike the healthy green shoots, they sent up when planted in the soil in the spring. But these sad, spindly sprouts would grow 2 or 3 feet in length as they reached toward the distant light of the window. The sprouts were, in their bizarre, futile growth, a sort of desperate expression of the directional tendency I have been describing. They would never become plants, never mature, never fulfil their real potential. But under the most adverse circumstances, they were striving to become. Life would not give up, even if it could not flourish. In dealing with clients whose lives have been terribly warped, in working with men and women on the back wards of state hospitals, I often think of those potato sprouts. So unfavourable have been the conditions in which these people have developed that their lives often seem abnormal, twisted, scarcely human. Yet, the directional tendency in them can be trusted. The clue to understanding their behaviour is that they are striving, in the only ways that they perceive as available to them, to move toward growth, toward becoming. To healthy persons, the results may seem bizarre and futile, but they are life's desperate attempt to become itself.

Carl Rogers (1980) A WAY OF BEING

This is such an exciting insight. It means that we each have it in us to self-transform. The seeds are already there. So do we allow our religion to be the propagation of that? Is the spiritual life for me and for you a developmental process? The horrible lock-down which we're going to be in and out of for a while yet no doubt has at least prompted many of us to ask, so, what really matters for me? Acting on that might have radical consequences, and in that be for growth. In fact it might be the seed falling on good soil, hearing the word and finally understanding it, and producing an amazing yield.

Yet I can't help but look back over my forty-two years in parish ministry and wonder if too many of my seeds got snatched away by the evil one, but rather mostly falling as if on rocky ground because I lacked sufficient rootedness, or just yielding nothing in my worrying so much about the cares of the world? What would I have to say to the Lord in giving an account of my stewardship? In the next few weeks people might be saying "Thank you Father Andrew for all that you've done for us" – while the truth is that there is all that I have not done for

you. But then I think of Jesus and the apostles. St Peter, for example, failed him dismally at one crucial point, but still the Lord transformed what he had to offer recognising its potential for further growth in the life of the ongoing Christian movement. Don't we all know deep down that truly nothing is ever wasted, and that there is, as Carl Rogers later described it, an actualising tendency inherent in all of life?

Sermon for 26th July:

St Augustine's 'Confessions' was written way back in the 4th century, but has since become a Christian classic for all times. In it he muses: "What *is* time? ... Provided that no-one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know. But I confidently affirm to myself that if nothing passes away, there is no past time, and if nothing arrives, there is no future time, and if nothing existed there would be no present time." [1] Jacky and I can't believe that 27 years have passed since we came to meet Pam Howard and Peter Oldroyd, then churchwardens, after I'd applied for the post of Rector advertised in the Church Times. What is time? So much has happened. Yet it seems like just yesterday.

What brought us to St Nicolas', really, were, as a family the needs of our children and, for me, the ethos of this church community. Rachel was just five so we wanted to settle her at school. St Nicolas' Infant School seemed idyllic and we were so pleased to watch Rachel settle into the reception class there. So began a very happy and secure time for us all. Soon it was Sarah's turn to go to school, Jacky got a job there, and I was very involved in all sorts of ways. I'm sure you will all appreciate that the relationship between the church and the school is at the heart of our life, so I want to take a moment to highlight this. As a Church Aided School our PCC is responsible for appointing a sizeable number of the Governors and the priest is always ex-officio one of those Foundation Governors. I came to chair the Governing Body for quite a few years, but that had to end as the role of a governor was evolving into what it is now. This how their responsibilities are described [2]: to provide strategic leadership and accountability; oversee the financial performance of the school; ensure its clarity of vision, ethos, and strategic direction by setting policies and targets; monitor and evaluate progress; and be a source of challenge and support to the headteacher, as well as keeping close to pupils, staff, parents and the wider school community. So it's become quite a tall order! But I know other Governors here will agree with me that we love our hands-on involvement and really value the Church Foundation. Just think of that word 'foundation'. It's essentially a relationship, warm and living, our prayerful support of Emma and the staff, our full inclusion of the children and their families. How I'll miss my Tuesday assemblies, and all those little voices piping up in supermarket aisles, when cycling down the road, once even when crossing the road in Paris: "Hello Fr Andrew!" Always end of term services held here in church – and we did have one this term, albeit on Zoom! The lovely thing is how the children just get the sure sense that this is their church. Our church life is centred here, and it's also centred at the school. So these are important foundations, foundations to build on.

Then my own strong motive to apply for the job here was its definite ethos, and knowing that it's been like this, consistently and continuously, since the late 19th century catholic revival in the Church of England. So this I especially want to highlight: a dimension of our church life you must never stop valuing. However; one church member has just written to me saying how she's observed over the years my 'spiritual pilgrimage'. "You haven't been afraid to change", she said. I read this a little uneasily, all too aware of my impulsive and vacillating character. But she went on reassuringly to refer to St John Henry Newman who famously said: "In a higher world it is otherwise, but here below to live is to change and to be perfect is to have changed often" [3] That sounded much better! But surely catholic *means* the whole flowing stream of the Christian tradition – all of it, and always flowing on? This letter then reminded me: "theological education notwithstanding, you didn't arrive at priesthood fully formed ... like the rest of us, you've continued to evolve". And this is what I want to highlight. It's so important that we don't get stuck, that we don't prefer an escapist religion of nostalgia, or become a little ghetto. The head teacher of our school I first met, Elizabeth Taylor, said she saw St Nicolas' church as a sort of niche community. She was at least partly right and I still feel every uncomfortable admitting that. What I want to highlight is what's said in the letter, how she has seen St Nicolas' move towards "an ethos more inclusive and environmentally aware" and with "an adult spirituality". May that continue to develop as the essential ethos here.

And what is catholic? It's being part of the wider life of the ecumenical church community here in Guildford with our town chaplain; it's being a parish of the Guildford diocese with Bishop Andrew; and it's being a church that still believes in visible Christian unity when so many have lost heart with that, so, *our* URC brothers and sisters, and, *our* Pope Francis. I was baptized as a Methodist and I've come to a very warm appreciation of early Methodism's radical socialism, but I believe in a Catholic Church where Methodists and, say, Eastern Orthodox, can all find their place around the Lord's Table. Many of you will be well aware that over the years I've opened up to certain other church and faith traditions. Each time I've received insights and practices that may not have stayed with me but have all been part of the spiritual learning curve. I relate to Jesus talking about the householder being able to bring out of his treasure what is new and what is old. In the end we need to know where we feel most at home – but to be truly inclusive and outward-looking, may *that* continue to develop as the essential ethos here.

It's relationships that matter of course. A priest knows it's time to move on when you know more of those in the list of the departed that we remember each week than there are sitting in church! Yet all those individuals stay

very close to us. And they are part of the living community of the whole Church, as we say, militant, expectant and triumphant. Hence the final hymn this morning. We can't sing it, but I am going to say it as a prayer.

Talking of unity it's the growth of the relationship between our two churches, St Nicolas' and Guildford United Reformed Church, which has made it real for us. Whatever the technicalities, Liam doesn't work for St Nic's *and* also for the URC, because it's in working for one church that he works for the other. I'm sorry to be missing the welcome of Wayne as the new minister, *our* Minister – and who we hope will soon be able to help with the introduction of *our* new priest. And we also have our relationship with Upper Room Ministries, with whom we share our church especially on Sunday afternoons. It's been a blessing to welcome them – *because we're so different* – and we hope they can begin worshipping together again soon.

Personally I'm completely rubbish at goodbyes – aware of how much we come to need each other. In his meditations St Augustine realized that time was of God, as everything is. "For I love", he said, "and this love was your gift". The love we have for others, and which they have for us, is all God's gift – in our particular times, but held by God who is all time. For the year 2 leavers at school last week the catchphrase was that it's not goodbye, but, "See you later", because they have a couple of social events lined up for them during the summer. And Jacky and I are pleased to have been invited back to the Dedication Festival on October 25th when I'll preside and preach at the 10 o'clock Mass and hopefully we'll be able to enjoy the socializing that's denied us today! So it's not going to be goodbye, just "See you later". For in God's kingdom it always is.

[1] St Augustine 'Confessions' OUP 1991 Book X.

[2] National Governance Association <https://www.nga.org.uk/Governance-Recruitment/Be-a-school-governor-or-trustee.aspx>

[3] J H Newman 'On the Development of Ideas'

At the end of the 10'clock Mass 26th June

I have six things that I specially wanted to say today.

1] "The end of an era"? Certainly for Jacky and me. But there have been lots of eras in the history of our parish. And each time they did have to end. I've already confessed that I'm not v good at goodbyes. So I think I'm saying this to myself: that we do have to let there be endings – because that's what allows life to evolve. We don't like change, but life requires it.

2] There are always vacancies when clergy leave. And because of the circumstances at the moment it might turn out to be a longer vacancy than otherwise. I know you don't want to hear that. But I just want to encourage you all to feel that it's OK to be in it for the long haul.

3] Be kind to the churchwardens. We're so lucky in having two fantastic churchwardens in Linda and Darrol. It's every churchwarden's nightmare to be faced with a vacancy. At times they will feel the pressure of holding it all together. We were saying the other day that church life doesn't just depend on the priest – it's all about our life as a community – so don't let church life during the vacancy just depend on the churchwardens.

4] Be kind to the Director of Music. It's tough being a choir master when you can't have a choir! Music is such an integral part of our life here, and in many ways as in all parishes, it will need to be rebuilt. And you can work with Tim in that I hope.

5] I guess what I've valued most about St Nicolas' is how it is a prayerful church. In the days ahead – faced as we'll all be with all sorts of unknown challenges – I really want to encourage you to keep up your own spiritual practice. You'll know what that is for you. But it'll be the quality of your spiritual life as a church community, and individually as members of it, that will make all the difference.

6] Simply this: Jacky and I have been so happy here. Thank you!