

## **Bishop Mike Harrison writes...**

Storm Isha's 107mph gales have claimed lives in the UK after winds toppled trees and sparked travel chaos – with another second storm now set to hit. As I write further strong winds and heavy rain are forecast.

In Suffolk, we have recently experienced severe flooding and power cuts amid the gales that have battered our country.

For me, I saw firsthand how communities respond to the impact of appalling weather as my own home was flooded last year. My house in Mendlesham near Stowmarket was flooded on 20th October 2023 around 11.30am in the morning. I was at home busily working on the laptop – looked out and saw lots of puddles in the garden and some heavy rain coming down. I turned back to the screen and was absorbed for 10 minutes – then looked up and saw effectively a lake of water surrounding the house. I realised then that with the rain coming down and the water level just under the lip of the front door, it was going to come in to the house.

My wife Rachel was in too and so rather hopefully we put some towels to shore up the door to prevent water entering – minutes later we saw water seeping in everywhere – through the doors, the walls and up through the floor. Realising the game was up we faced the question “What do you save first?”

Well not surprisingly it's the personal items that carry the memories of times and people that carry the most weight at a time like that. There's no crude assessing of monetary valuations but we grabbed the wedding photo album, grandma's chair, the picture from my father of blessed memory.

We also tend to be concerned with those things that we've laboured for too don't we? For instance I was inordinately preoccupied with the 10kg of blackberries that I had personally picked that summer which were in the (now unpowered) freezer and worried about them being defrosted and needlessly wasted. (I needn't have worried, we bagged them up and got them to a neighbour who kindly offered her freezer!).

And then my eye was caught by some movement outside the window – I looked again to see the oak tree at the front of the house slowly coming down and taking the power line and telegraph wire with it – this was beginning to feel like something out of a film.

We moved what we could upstairs as the waters rose and our immediate neighbours in their kindness spotted our struggles and came to help. Nevertheless

it became progressively more difficult to move anything as we were wading through 1.5 feet of water and were getting tired out.

It also began to dawn on us that our home was now uninhabitable and we needed somewhere else to go. I made a call and some good friends in Ipswich would put us up for as long as we wanted – friends indeed. However by this time the village was itself cut off and accessible only by tractor or 4-wheel drives – what to do? Well, more kindness from our community – next door neighbours living on higher ground offered to put us up – again for as long as we wanted.

Why the flooding? Well people are pointing to climate change, building developments, water running off fields, neglected and blocked drains, culverts and streams, extraordinary levels of rainfall and high water-tables – the list goes on. The causes of flooding need to be understood and addressed – Suffolk has had more than its fair share through the autumn and winter of 2023/2024.

But more immediately significant to us than knowing who or what to blame for the flooding was the neighbourly kindness we experienced both from people who knew us well and those who did not in our community and beyond.

As a bishop I preach and teach on loving our neighbours as ourselves, on kindness as a fruit of the Holy Spirit and of the need to embody our faith in service of one another. And I see that embodied in my work with churches across Suffolk. I see churches reaching out to support their communities, making a difference, with everything from food banks to group activities supporting those feeling isolated right across the county.

But being the recipient of such unself-interested kindness amid appalling weather underlined to me just what encouragement and heart such gestures can give to those in situations of adversity. So whatever you're in danger of being overwhelmed by, may you be more overwhelmed by the kindness of others in that situation.

And may you offer that kindness to those in need too.

*Bishop Mike is writing the column this month because his colleague Bishop Martin is on holiday.*