

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

February 2022

Dear Friends,

As many of you will be aware, I recently returned to work at the beginning of the Season of Advent, after a significant period of ill health. I am deeply grateful for those who have expressed concern and care both during my absence and on my return. If I were to describe the experience – then I might well choose the following words: *for a season I lost the happiness of my calling!* The language of *happiness* might be unfamiliar or incongruous to some and yet personally I become more and more convinced of its usefulness in relation to the life of faith and what it means to be made in the Image of God. In many ways *happiness* is a contemporary obsession and an ancient wisdom. The aspiration for a good and happy life fuelled the intellectual endeavours of the ancient Greek philosophers (witness Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates) and became theological material for the great pre-modern theologians in the Christian tradition (e.g., Aquinas and Augustine to name but two). Finally, perhaps not so well-known, it became a subject of intense fascination for John Wesley who undoubtedly saw a *'happy and holy communion'* with God as both the foundation and the fulfilment of our life in Christ – the doctrines of justification, new birth and sanctification became the means to grow more fully into the life of God and experience the deep-seated contentment, satisfaction, and joy of abiding in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In sermon 120, The Unity of the Divine Being, Wesley puts it like this.

'He made you; and he made you to be happy in him; and nothing else can make you happy.'

In other words, there is a *happiness* that is entirely appropriate as a descriptor of the life of faith – less fleeting emotion and more the deep contentment of human flourishing in close relatedness to the living God. However, over the last two years there has been very little to feel *happy* about, particularly in a period when we have passed through the collective trauma of a viral pandemic that has created all kinds of suffering - emotionally, mentally, and physically. We know all too well that there are many exhausted, bereft, and desolate people who are hanging on – and the church community is no exception. Nevertheless, this is a season when all of us have had to seek consolation and comfort and take some responsibility for how we might negotiate this wilderness experience.

During my period of leave I instinctively sought a perceived structure to my day – if you like a rule of life. I made a covenant to do five simple things each day:

To pray – however short or long

To read some theology or poetry

To speak to a significant supportive other (colleague, friend, or family)

To do some physical exercise

To do a household chore (clean, iron etc.)

Without overthinking it, I had chosen to live by a rule or method and in time I began to gradually feel happier, healthier, and whole. In a variety of ways, this fivefold rule was enabling me to appreciate once more the deep centre of all things which is the life-giving God. Learning to tend the interior life, and to make space for it, lies at the heart of this vision – and for me it has become the one thing needful above all things! That is *not* at the exclusion of the rest of life and work and all the proper responsibilities that belong to us all, but it is to approach these things from the overflow of God's promised shalom. It is a commitment to take responsibility, with all God's people, for creating the culture and conditions for human flourishing both our own and all of God's creation.

I leave you with a question from the Carmelite mystic, St. John of the Cross:

'O you who were created for union with God himself and whom he is ever attracting to himself, what are you doing with your precious lives, with your time?'

*With peace and blessing,
Julian*