

## August Pastoral Letter from Christchurch

Dear Friend,

Over the past few weeks, Jane, Hannah and I have had a visitor staying with us. His name is Harry and we have loved having him around. I think that he has also enjoyed being with us. He is a very easy guest and eats whatever we give him. He seems very content with all that we have been able to do to make his time with us a pleasant one for him. He has had a real country holiday as Harry's home is in Bath. He seems to have taken great pleasure in our walks together in Savernake Forest, along the old railway line and beside the River Kennet and the Avon and Kennet canal. Harry is always eager to explore our beautiful countryside and whenever he hears the clinking of keys, he comes as fast as he can and stands by the front door, wagging his tail. Harry is a ten year old Jack Russell Terrier and we will miss him when he goes home in a few days' time.

When we were walking with Harry the other day, we commented on how he is pleased with everything. Whatever he is doing, he does it with great enthusiasm as though it is his "favourite" thing! Whether it is jumping to catch a ball, trotting along the canal path, running in the meadow at Stonebridge, sniffing a tree trunk in the Forest or paddling in the river, it is the best thing ever. Watching Harry, I wondered why I wasn't always so content and happy with everything I do. Why isn't everything my "favourite" thing? Why do some things bring a groan and a sigh, rather than joy and a smile? I suppose that it is part of the human condition. We all enjoy some things more than others and it begins at a young age. In school, children soon let you know whether they "love" or "hate" mathematics, English, science, art, craft, PE and so on. We are all different and have various skills and gifts. In our families, work places, churches and communities some folk's gifts make them good at finances, administration, catering, organizing, and looking after buildings. Others' gifts enable them to relate well to people, correspond with, care and visit folks. Yet others' skills lie in teaching, leading worship, playing musical instruments, praying, singing, reading, serving refreshments, sharing faith and preaching. Fortunately, we all have different talents to offer to God to use in the life of the Church for his praise and glory.

Naturally, we feel happiest when we are doing what we enjoy. Jane, Hannah and I do not know whether Harry enjoys running in the field, chasing his ball or watching the garden best. He loves everything. When we are doing things for God, we know that not everything brings us joy. In the Covenant Service, we recognise that "Christ has many services to be done...some are suitable to our natural inclinations and material interests, others are contrary to both; in some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is given to us in Christ, who strengthens us." (The Methodist Worship Book, page 288).

Reflecting on these things I thought of Brother Lawrence. He was a seventeenth century monk, who lived in the Discalced Carmelite monastery in Paris. He was concerned about living a holy life in the everyday, ordinary things of life. In "The Practice of the Presence of God", Brother Lawrence tells the writer of the book, how he believed that he should spend as much time in prayer in his work as in his devotions. So throughout the day, he speaks simply and naturally to God. In this way, he learns to get joy from doing things which he would otherwise find a chore. The book contains a number of conversations with the author and in the second one, Brother Lawrence says that "Although he once had a great dislike for kitchen work, he developed quite a facility for doing it over the fifteen years he was there. He attributed this to his doing everything for the love of God,

asking as often as possible for grace to do his work. He said that he was presently in the shoe repair shop and that he liked it very much. He would, however, be willing to work anywhere, always rejoicing at being able to do little things for the love of God." (The Practice of the Presence of God, p. 16, 1982, Whitaker House, ISBN: 0-883668-105-6). Although it needs working at, and prayer throughout the day, we can be, as Brother Lawrence says be "happier than kings" when we are doing even the smallest and most mundane chore, such as "picking up a straw from the ground", when we remind ourselves that we are doing it for the love of God.

Preparing to go away on our summer holiday, I know that I will get more pleasure from writing this and preparing for Sunday's worship than dealing with admin.; from visiting people than tidying the study; from loading the car than cleaning it; and from packing the suitcase than cleaning the bathroom. Yet, here is an opportunity to remind myself that even when I do the smallest act, such as picking up a piece of paper or a sock from the floor, I do it all for the love of God. I remember how Jesus said that even when you give someone a drink, you are doing it as though for Jesus himself, (Matthew 25:35-40). No matter how hard such acts maybe, we can be encouraged and filled with joy, at the knowledge that we are doing it for Jesus and giving him pleasure. A wonderful hymn, by George Herbert, (1593-1633), begins "Teach me, my God and King "in all things thee to see, and what I do in everything, to do it as for thee", (Singing the Faith 668). It continues in the fourth verse, "A servant with this clause makes drudgery divine; who sweeps a room, as for thy laws, makes that and the action fine." I can hear Brother Lawrence saying, "Amen!"

This is going to take some working out and by the time we go on holiday, I may well need it from being so exhausted from trying to put it into practice! On the other hand, remembering that we do everything out of love for God, may bring encouragement, energy and joy, as we let the Holy Spirit dwell in us, Harry's holiday with us is nearly over, but Jane and I are about to begin ours. Staying with Jane's Mother in Jersey, we look forward to taking her to the beach, to seeing the waves, walking on the headlands, swimming in the sea and enjoying the beauty of God's creation. In such moments of rest and relaxation, we can become aware of being in the presence of God. Holidays become holy days. Doing the chores and mundane things which, even on holiday, still need doing, the challenge is to remember that everything is done for the love of God. It will be interesting to see whether I will agree with Brother Lawrence that these things make us "happier than kings" or with Harry, that they too become my "favourite thing"! Whatever your circumstances this summer, I hope that you will know the presence of God and his joy from knowing that everything you do is for love of God.

May God bless you richly this summer and give you peace and joy,

*Stephen*