

**All Saints' Church
Cottenham with Rampton**

**Pastoral Letter No 78
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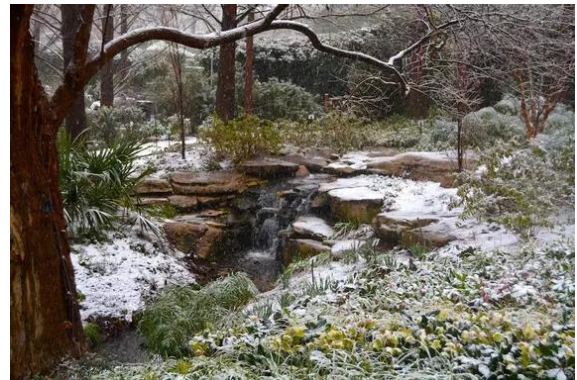
Dear Church Family,

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you, and a very Happy New Year to you all.

I hope this finds you well. January can be an awkward month. Even if Christmas is a quiet time for some, it is, all around us, a time of excitement, when people plan, go shopping, decorate their homes, sing carols, gather in churches... But when the singing stops and the tinsel is brushed away, there begins the real work of Christmas.

Christian theologian and mystic, Howard Thurman (1899-1981), expresses this beautifully in his poem 'The Work of Christmas Begins':

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*



As God's people, we know Christmas to be the great incarnation of God in the infant Jesus. Christmas brings the Prince of Peace to humanity. And as followers of Jesus, we are his light-bearers, commissioned to bind up the broken-hearted, help the poorer members of our community, protect our planet. We are ambassadors of Christ's kingdom ethic.

There is so much to do, and the end-of-year festivities may have left us with a feeling of both fatigue and bewilderment. Where and how do we start?

A friend wrote recently that she was going to concentrate on her physical health as a new year's resolution. What a wonderful idea. *Mens sana in corpore sano*. A healthy mind in a healthy body. We've all got to start somewhere. How about we start with ourselves? After all, we will not do much work if our body and mind are... let's say deflated!

When this friend talked about physical health, I immediately thought about nature. And nature is gorgeous in Cottenham and Rampton. So how about we start this new year and our Christian work by exploring or rediscovering our immediate surroundings?

As a boy growing up in a small black community in Florida, Howard Thurman loved nature. Quoting Paul Harvey,¹ he ‘loved to sit near the ocean at night; it gave him a sense of “timelessness, of existing beyond the reach of the ebb and flow of circumstances,” even when storms raged and threatened to carry him away. He ‘felt rooted in life, in nature, in existence’. And even when one particular storm coming from the sea stripped trees bare in his town, the oak tree in his backyard held fast. “I needed the strength of that tree, and like it, I wanted to hold my ground” said the young Thurman who talked to the tree and felt understood.

The churches of All Saints in Cottenham and Rampton have beautiful churchyards. Even in the middle of winter, in the rain and the snow, the trees are majestic and seem to watch us from above, waiting for us to come and be still, or walk gently among them, and in the quiet,



seek God’s voice, God’s wisdom, God’s inspiration to do his work.

Trees are always beautiful, and I find them especially inspiring in winter, their branches stretching high and wide. They remind me of God’s arms, longing to embrace all of his children.

As the real work of Christmas begins, some will feel ready to throw themselves into action, and will know exactly what to do. Others will be reflecting on new ways to serve God and their community. Some will need to pray and speak with friends to know how they can be of use. I do believe that nature can feed into this prayer and nurture our faith.

Thurman was a mystic, an intellectual, a poet. He was not an activist of the civil rights struggle. But he was a quiet force of intellect and faith. His thinking was rooted in nature mysticism, and he shaped and transformed ideas about how to remake America and indeed the whole planet. He also remarkably brought together diverse parts of the American religious tradition in a unique way.

Thurman was always ‘deploying the God in us against the most basic forms of violence and inequality that shaped and distorted social life at home and abroad’. And it all started with contemplating the sea, weathering powerful storms and holding on to a lone oak tree.

So I pray that in the nature surrounding you, you will find peace and renewed energy to do God’s work this year, taking care of yourselves, and enjoying the presence of the Lord who only has our hands to do His work, our lips to sing His praise, our feet to walk with those who seek Him.

Many blessings.

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¹ Harvey, Paul, *Howard Thurman and the Disinherited: A Religious Biography* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2020)