

Pastoral Letter – East Anglia District

Chair of the District - Revd. Julian M. Pursehouse

20:05:2020

Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

The other day I found myself in the *novel* position of conducting a funeral – I say *novel* for I realised that I had not done one for 7 years since being a Chair of District. It was a privilege to conduct the funeral of the late Revd. G. Allan Stanton a retired minister in the Norwich Circuit - to mourn his loss, to give thanks for his ministry and to commend him into the hands of Almighty God. In the light of the viral pandemic and the restrictions of lockdown this was to be a *socially-distanced* funeral! Nothing quite prepared me for this eventuality – not only was there the obvious sense of loss and grief for close family but there was a deeper sense of grief that belonged to the wider social context. There was no consoling touch, no comforting arm or shoulder, no clasped grieving hands and no sharing of tissues amongst a congregation of 7 who were spaced 2 metres apart. The absence of these familiar gestures of human warmth and kindness moved me deeply for it seemed to mirror the deep sense of loss that we are all feeling in the present crisis. At a personal level, I long for the day when I can embrace my Mum as I always did and I long for the day when I can sit and share the craic with good friends – for a while these must be conjured memories!

As I pondered these things I was reminded of the voice of *lament* in the biblical tradition; those passages where honest, difficult and painful realities are expressed in the presence of God. I'm often struck by how pervasive this voice of lament is in the Psalmody; here for example we have the anguish of Psalm 13;

'How long, O Lord? Will you forget me for ever!

How long will you hide your face from me?

How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long?'

Perhaps in this strange period of time it is healthy and therapeutic to express our collective sense of lament not because we lack faith or we particularly doubt God's goodness but instead because ***'lament is the last refuge of the courage that hopes in God'***. To articulate lament is good for the soul; for it is often an authentic, raw and real unveiling of self in the presence of the one who continues to enfold us in restorative and transforming love. Each time we lament we discover the rich plenitude of God's grace and the divine patience that bears with us. Each time we lament we rediscover the endless hospitality of God's love and the still presence that lies at the heart of all things. It is indeed the last refuge for those who have used up their own reserves only to discover the reserves of eternity.

I do hope and pray that as you journey through these difficult times you will acknowledge the *lost things* and find the voice of *lament*. I trust too that in your lamenting you will discover the rich and inexhaustible love of God that holds you fast and will not let you go! I leave you this week with the words of Bernadette Farrell;

O God, you search me and you know me.

All my thoughts lie open to your gaze.

When I walk or lie down you are before me:

Ever the maker and keeper of my days.

With Peace and Blessing, Julian