

Vicar's Pastoral Letter

Date : July / August 2008
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Subject : The signs of God's presence and his abiding love for us all.

Dear Friends,

It was a great pleasure on the evening of Sunday 15th June to welcome to St. Mary's bellringers from many churches, including our own, for a special celebration service to congratulate two of our ringers, Malcolm Hollingshead and Philip Barker-Brown, on 60 years of bellringing. A wonderful achievement which was recognised by both being presented with an engraved tankard. Long may they, and all of our ringers, continue to ring those bells to the glory of God. It was a good opportunity to thank all those who ring our bells both at St. Mary's, St. Denys' and wherever for the sound of bells floating across town and village, field and meadow, is one of the hallmarks of our British countryside and, in my view, cannot be equalled in any other nation. Just as the towers and spires of our churches are the visible symbols of God's presence among us, the sound of the bells are most certainly the audible as they call people to worship and to prayer and to recognise that there is a power greater than our own and a love that will not let us go.

And this is why, for me, bell ringing is far more than a pastime for every time a joyous peal is heard it is a statement of faith and a declaration of intent. The faith that no matter what might be happening in the world or in our own lives there is He who is greater than it all and who, through His Son Jesus, has conquered sin and death. The bells are a sound of hope and a declaration that, come what may, we shall never give in to hopelessness and despair.

I recently took an assembly at Kempsey school when I showed the children a photograph I took of a sculpture depicting a small child nestled securely within a large hand. The children were quick to spot that we are the child and that the hand is the hand of God. I then showed them another image of a photograph I had blown up to a very large size so that all you could see were a series of small squares. It was impossible to tell that in fact the photograph was of a pig sleeping and snoring sweetly after its dinner time meal! The picture was aptly entitled Sweet Dreams!"

I pointed out that we couldn't see the whole picture when we were too close to it and that our lives are like this in that they are a mixture of good times and bad, happy times and extremely painful times when we can easily feel that we have fallen out of God's protective hand and that somehow He's forgotten us and has ceased to love us. And when we feel like this, and some of you reading this letter might feel like that now, it's so important to remind ourselves that we don't see the whole picture but God does. We're only aware of what's happening to us right now, this moment, but God does have a plan and purpose for our lives and He sees and understands it all. One day we too will see and understand but for now please know that you haven't been forsaken or abandoned and that God still cares for you as He holds you in His loving palm.

This is the hope and loving assurance that the Christian faith can give you. I'm not pretending that it's easy, and I certainly don't find it easy, but every time I see a tower or spire or hear the bells ringing out joyously it reminds me that there is hope and a love that will never die and which has conquered all things. And so wherever you travel or wherever you find yourself this summer, even if it's sitting in your own front room, don't forget to look for those beautiful signs of God's presence and His abiding love for you as He holds you safe in His hand of love.

Wherever you travel, whatever you see and whoever you are may God continue to bless you as you journey through your life.

Peter

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