

Mid Sabbatical Scribblings!

Dear Friends

It's 15th December at the time of writing, and by my reckoning it's close to halfway through my sabbatical, and so I will attempt to manage to jot down a few observations and reflections on what has been going on for me for the last 40 odd days. As befits Seattle (where I am currently staying):- the home of Starbucks, I am typing away in a coffee house, looking out over a cemetery with the Space Needle in the distance. It's now my 2nd time in the city here, staying with my brother and his family after flying across in November. After arriving the first time and enjoying worshipping at Christ Church Episcopalian Church in the University district of the city with a lovely welcoming inclusive congregation there, I flew down to Nashville, Tennessee. Having then picked up a "small" car (bigger than our Honda at home) I then drove a further 100 miles south to Sewanee (the acclaimed! 'University of the South') where I journeyed for a week with the school of theology which trains future ministers including an exchange programme with Westcott House. I spent time with Sue (one of Westcott's current students) together with her husband Mike - a vicar (who I actually taught 9 years ago when he too was a student at college and up on placement at St Bride's Old Trafford). Highlights included worshipping at Mount Zion Baptist Church Tullahoma, a black gospel church where I felt at home singing "Our God is awesome" together with being invited to "preside" at the impromptu communion at the end.

It's the first time I have been in the southern states in America, and I am still processing how their history continues to shape society there:- namely the civil war and the continued difficulties around race relations and ghettoization. These reflections were reinforced when in Houston, when as well as taking in the dubious joys of driving on their super-highways, I encountered a number of projects attempting to break down barriers of denomination & race. "Projectcurate" and ReVision are 2 such groups of folk attempting to do this. You can hear me debating with them on [this podcast](#). Other highlights with my brief stint with Matt included a therapy group session with tough love handed out to former sex workers by Kathy, herself a former street worker and drug addict, and a tour of the gang dominated areas of Houston. Ron, a former gangster from Detroit was my guide, and he certainly took me outside of my comfort zone as we cruised in his large pick-up through some of the most deprived & lawless areas of the city as he was "skoping"; ie; making his presence felt. "Aren't you ever worried?" I asked him, as we were picking up some pretty hostile stares. "Not at all" he replied "I've got my Bible, my God, and of course my glock" (his semi-automatic weapon!). He's also got his own book out - let me know if you would like to borrow it (tho' it comes with a parent advisory warning!)

And so to Christ Church (New) Brunswick!... as some of you know, coming across our "twin" was a serendipitous - a mis-typed email search which took me to their website. Anyway their congregation just like our is a wonderfully mixed one, and I had the privilege of joining them for a vestry (PCC) strategy planning day as well



as the services on Sunday (including the 8.00 morning one!). Their Rector; Joanna Hollis, together with wife Karen, were incredibly welcoming. The setting is quite similar too, with a University (Rutgers) making up part of the parish, but also with homelessness & addiction of various types visible as well. However unlike most English/American comparisons, this time they have the history on their side: whilst ours is a church built in the 70's, theirs' is too, but with origins in the 1770's! Their church organ was also replaced recently, to the tune of \$1million! (sorry Chris & Joel, I can't see that quite being our next purchase!)



Speaking of organs I'm reflecting on (old) Brunswick's community carol service which of course I will not be able to attend for the 1st time in 23 years! Suffice to say that that I will miss it hugely, as indeed I will all our Christmas celebrations. So to close, in what has been a bumpy year for many, both in the UK post Brexit, and across here with the presidential elections; - may we find our hope in the gift of love given that very first Christmas; that perfect love which casts out fear, and which dispels darkness now and always.

God Bless

Simon

