

My first ever sabbatical has been such an exciting time, one that I am so grateful for.

I saw all I had planned for and expected to happen, but then there entered all that I had not imagined would be part of this time. I was not expecting to embark on such a time of learning new aspects about myself, which went deeper and further than what I have done for a very long time. It became a chance to explore new ways of who I am, and why I have done things the way I have, and realised some of these ways have to be corrected, and others have to be re-affirmed. I admit I wasn't too sure what it would be like to be on my own for a whole month, and it was very good. I did a lot of walking, and while walking pondering; I had no constraints of time, there was no rush, and there was the challenge of listening, of wondering, of hoping, and of finding a few new ways. The depth of this I was not expecting!

The theme I had chosen for my Sabbatical research had to do with Art: how Art ratifies or challenges the social perceptions of its time and our times. I had a list of works of art that I really wanted to see, and I got to see all the list; and while seeing those I discovered so much more than I had ever imagined, even came across Art Museums that I had never heard of (i.e. Strasbourg), so all in all it was a long collection of moments and places: Churches. Art Galleries. City tour walks. Learning. Seeing. Discovering. Reflecting. The human capacity of creating, and imagination, and building, and challenging...

The first part of the Sabbatical was out of UK: Bilbao, Madrid, Valencia, Prague, Munich, Strasbourg and Colmar, Ghent, Berlin, this unexpectedly found Leipzig added to the list.

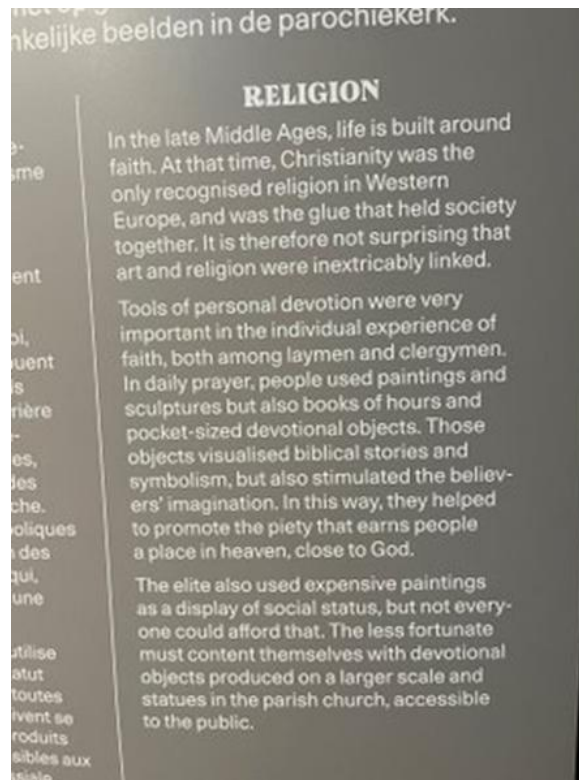
Then the second part back in UK included: East Acton (London), St. Ives, North Somerset and Devon. Cookham and Coventry: both of these I hope to get to sometime soon. Coventry Cathedral is twinned with Kaiser Wilhelm Kirche in Berlin, in this way closing the circle.

Some terrible moments in history of destruction, death, hatred. And also times of kindness, love, empathy, solidarity. Often happening at the same time. I began to realise that all this was having a deep effect on me. And questions started following me around. Let me share some with you.

I realised the importance of symbols, when the centrality of a belief cannot be truly communicated with only words. Like so much of what Jesus taught when he spoke in parables – images for deeper truth. Or when describing himself he used the concept of “like” in the sense of being similar to: I am the gate, I am the true vine, I am the bread of life. And even more dramatic when he said: this is my body, this is my blood. We are challenged to use our imagination to try to grasp the deep meaning of these words, because words aren't enough.

This was clear when seeing the churches of the Middle Ages, a time where very few people knew how to read and write ... and to communicate biblical teachings the church used art and architecture: the immensity of the buildings with towers reaching up to heaven. The decorations outside the churches, and the stained glass windows...all this told a story without using many words.

It was the time in which the church was central to society, determining every aspect of life and death, the present and the future. Where most of art included a moral dimension: be good, follow the right teachings, if not you know where you will end up. The power of money, which made buildings ostentatious, where those who donated to the church were recommended.



Notice in the Museum of Fine Arts in Ghent

"A church or cathedral in European culture is intended to be the centre of community, where the congregations are encouraged to talk to each other, or at least to make contact and connect with each other. The European churches of the medieval era were not only places of religious relevance, but were also places where communities were formed by the public; where cultural opportunities were offered, and, at times where trade occurred. Consequently the church was regarded as a multi-functional institution; more like a contemporary cultural centre". (Jungu Yoon, Spirituality in Contemporary Art)

Over time, this was challenged. Seeing the statue of Gutenberg in Strasbourg with the importance of the printing press was visible. Or coming across the statue of Jan Hus in Prague who was a Reformer before the Reformation, and again in Strasbourg the Church of St Thomas on Martin Luther Street, where Martin Bucer had been minister. A Reformer close to Luther. The importance of the Bible, and the need for education for people to learn how to read and write, and just as important: to discern what the Word of God signifies for the times. Also access to health – very much Reformation values. The centrality of rational thinking, which began to displace the emotional aspect represented in art.

And God at the centre of who we are, what we believe, and what we do. There is a painting hanging in my office at home, that Silvia painted for me. An abstract, so full of meaning. It reminds me every day of God caring, God seeing, God hearing, God working for the fullness of life. The painting is called **Exodus 3:7**, which comes immediately after the scene of Moses and the burning bush. *Then YHWH said, "I have seen the affliction of my people in Egypt; I have heard their cries under those who oppress them; I have felt their sufferings, so I have come down to rescue them from the hand of the Egyptians..."* I believe this continues to be the sense of faith, hope, justice and peace.



As so much of the art I saw, it may not speak to you in particular. You may not like it. And that is fine. Yet to another person it may open up a reality that up until then made no sense at all. The great challenge of art is that it reaches us where we are, and “communicates” in different ways, similar to what happened when Jesus met people where they were – a Samaritan woman by the well, the thief on the cross beside Jesus, even the other man on the cross (two very different reactions), the mother who is about to bury her only son, a tax collector, even the odd Pharisee. And the rejection of those who felt questioned by Jesus. A caring, loving and forgiving Jesus. All this continues to happen in the world – but does it happen because the Church is doing what it does OR does it happen beyond the realms of the church?

From churches without a blank place on their walls, because all is decorated, where all spirituality was visual: crucifix, saints, life in triptychs, and painting, to churches where the centrality was the pulpit, and the walls were blank, and probably one cross (not a crucifix). Where all was centred on reading and listening, even when singing hymns. Where the symbolic was neglected, leading us to the current times, where due to electronic media it seems that our attention span is no more than 7 minutes, then we need a break. On one hand it seems we live in a highly connected world: Facebook, Instagram, Tik Tok, emails. Where we hear about things happening far away in mere seconds, and how this allows for immediate responses of solidarity. And yet there is more isolation than ever. How is this development marking the life of the church?

Thinking of this I was reminded of an art installation I see every time I go to Tate Modern, by the Brazilian artist Cildo Meireles: **Babel**. A very biblical name. It is 8 mts high, in a room with little light, a tower of radios, from the older ones to the newer ones, all connected to different stations, given the accumulation of different sounds, there is no possibility of communication / understanding.

What is the voice of the church in the midst of this reality?



One of the biggest challenges in the transition since the Middle Ages has been the development of individualism playing a larger role in life. And this gradually led to the rise of secularism; which in the XX century, particularly as a result of WWII, set the social pattern. Interestingly what we can see is the diminishing of active membership in many (if not most) of historical churches, and at the same time an increase in the

membership of what could be called fundamentalist churches, often centred on the personality of the leader. In a way returning to the Middle Ages understanding of power, as emanating from God.

This individualism has also affected the development of ecumenism, which by definition is not based on “me” but rather on “us”. And this sees an alliance with a particular view of political power, which is strange given that these churches originally rejected any form of politics, and now they depend on it to survive. These churches were very anti-ecumenical, and now have created a connection with churches that are similar. And they were rather anti-roman catholic, and now they have created very strong alliances with the conservative wing of nearly all churches. Clearly the alliance is based on economical-social politics rather than religion.

I visited churches which for centuries were the place of meeting, sharing, learning; a place where the present and the past were interpreted, seen; where people learnt their role in society. And today people don't necessarily feel all that is the role of the church, where the church is one of the many places where one can go and discover these matters. The church has gone from being the centre of communication to being one of many, often on the margins of society. Has the church adapted to the new role?

Sometimes it has, often it hasn't. I have found that now a days people will go to parks, art galleries, massive music events...to find the symbolism it doesn't find elsewhere. Where the values presented by the media are questioned, where new ways of living life are presented. Where the spirituality for a new era is lived. And yet the church continues to have so much to offer, how then can we, as church play an active role in the world today.

It was quite sad to enter wonderful buildings that are struggling to be places of living worship, where a few dedicated volunteers do their best to keep the church open, welcoming, ready for visitors and ready for worship, and yet the world today has other priorities, and these wonderful buildings come closer to being museums than currents expressions of life and faith meeting.

I fell challenged to bring together a deep spirituality that includes symbols, silence, music, visual arts as well as reading the Bible, prayer, reflecting. Yet I know that silence in our churches is something that makes lots of people feel uncomfortable. How then does our worship express every aspect of our life, so that fullness of life is real? I'm still working on that...

During my Sabbatical I have tried to find the best way to communicate the centrality of God in the simplest of ways, but at the same time, the clearest of ways. And this in a time of climate distress causing droughts and floods, the rising of temperature; a time of war, destruction, discrimination, hatred, the rise of intolerance, in ways not seen since the World Wars. And the answer came to me in two Bible affirmations that have acquired a wonderful new meaning to me:

- Romans 8: “for I am convinced that ... nothing in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Jesus Christ our Lord”
- 1 John 4: “God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God and God in them...”

Those words led me back to a wonderful hymn in **Sing Praise** (176) that I believe should become an Anthem for these times, and below you can read verse 1 and 5 – Please read the whole hymn.

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live. A place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive. Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace. Here the love of Christ shall end divisions: Refrain All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.	Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard. And loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace. Let this house proclaim from floor to rafter; Refrain All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.
---	---

The Refrain says: ***All are welcome***, but is that true? Who are those who feel they don't have a place, whose dreams and visions can't be shared, whose tears are ignored, who feel their prayers aren't fit for a church, or where people don't feel healed, where the outcast and stranger bear the image of God's face? And being welcome is not only to worship, but into our rooms. We know people hire our rooms, but do we ever get to know them? How can we relate to them and them to us? And who don't feel they would be welcome – LGBTQIA+, Refugees, Asylum Seekers, People on the Autistic Spectrum? Can this hymn be sung in all honesty, if not all are welcome? How do we live the reality of God is love? I think this is one area we really have to work on.

In just a few months I will celebrate 40 years of my ordination, and over those years I have experienced so many different emotions, ministered to so many different people living so many different situations; I have been very happy, very sad, very cross, very upset, very challenged, very supported, very ignored, very excited, and a few times very much rejected. I have ministered to people who only wanted things done as they had always been done, and to people who hoped for new ways to be explored, where our humanity was celebrated in all its diversity, or where it was perfection that was expected, but never found.

This Sabbatical, which as I said in my first sentence – has been a time for which I am so grateful, I have had time to see, to reflect, to be challenged and I am still trying to discover a way forward. I have been able to make sense of one of the most difficult realities of life – summed up in the words of a poem/song written by Leonard Cohen called "Anthem" – *there is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in*.

The light which is God's gift to us, allows life to flourish, and as the Gospel of John chapter 1 says: *in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it*. We are not God, we are God's creation, and we are not perfect, we are not the "better" ones of the world, we are in the world. And God wants us to be bridge builders in a world where so many build walls. And in the cracks we each have, light gets in.

I saw wonderful places that moved me deeply, and yet one place where I was challenged probably because of its symbolic value to me, was Zionkirche in Berlin, the church where Dietrich Bonhoeffer was called to be minister in 1932. One of the simplest buildings of all, nothing over the top, where new thoughts were thought and people felt they were welcome. And in the brochure we were invited to take there was a sentence written by the great theologian and martyr:

***I believe that God can and wants to create good out of everything, even evil.
For that God needs people who use everything for the best***

We aren't all called to be great theologians or even martyrs, though we can be people who turn to God and be led on this way, vulnerable, broken and loved by God. We can only do this together.

In a recent meeting at the Vatican with artist (23rd June 2023) Pope Francis said: "*One of the things that draws art closer to faith is the fact that both tend to be troubling. Neither art nor faith can leave things simply as they are: they change, transform, move and convert them*" (<https://artandtheology.org/> 30th June 2023)

And this is how the churches, the paintings, the city tour walks, walking the Valley of the Rocks, or climbing up to the Tor... all began to make sense. Where we live, we are the light that comes from God, even with our cracks; and when people see that and connect their cracks with our cracks, and when the church (ie the people of God) has the courage to show its cracks, then and only then will we make that difference the world so much needs and that we find when walking the streets, talking to people everywhere: be in the art galleries, in massive musical events, and also in churches. Or while hiking up the hills in Somerset, or on a boat visiting Seal Island in St Ives.

Closing remarks

These closing remarks are being written in the last few days of the Sabbatical. A time of reflection on what went on, and hopefully on what is to come.

My ministry has been marked by a number of "signs", which have proved crucial and continue to be: Human Rights and Ecumenism, Discerning what we can and should do in THIS, our time. These influence my faith,

and as this happens they set the pattern of my life – how I vote, concerns I have, organizations I support, go back to the Bible to see what it says, priorities. I have reflected on passages such as Leviticus 19, Isaiah 58, the Book of Ruth, Luke 4, James. I have tried to connect the art I have seen to the message of Life in Fullness for all (John 10).

Most of the Sundays I have been in Swindon, I have joined worship in a totally different format than what I have done in the past, and found it exciting, different (VERY different), profound, welcoming and challenging. I have met with the Swindon Society of Friends (Quakers). It was a learning process -can you imagine me in silence for a whole hour?- and at the same time wonderful because in that silence there is an opportunity of listening. A BIG thank you to the Friends who welcomed me and shared with me and I was able to share with them! A different way of being together, where God is very much part of the sharing.

If there is something I'd like to keep alive is the importance of the Church in its prophetic role – where it has to take sides: the side of solidarity, justice, hope, inclusivity, life in fullness. Paul's instruction to the church in Rome continues to be one of our greatest challenges: *"I urge you, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. **Do not conform any longer to the patterns of the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is – God's good, pleasing and perfect will**"* (Romans 12; 1-2)

Faith, Hope and Love realised for the fullness of life.

Robert H Jordan

I have the following Power Points available if any group would be interested in "seeing" some to the things I have seen.

- Adam and Eve
- Crucifixions
- The three Altarpieces
- Church, pulpits, organs (Strasbourg and Ghent)
- Churches, churches and more churches (Munich)
- Churches, synagogues, organs (Prague)
- Churches, pulpits, organs (Bilbao, Madrid, Valencia)
- Churches: Berlin and Leipzig
- London: National Gallery
- Street Art