

# Reflections on my Study Leave

Phil Cansdale. 11<sup>th</sup> June to 8<sup>th</sup> July 2018

As I begin to return to the parish after four weeks away I wanted to say a huge “thank you” to colleagues – and the church as a whole – and reflect a little bit on what I’ve been up to over the last month.

## “Come unto me and....”

I’m never quite sure what to call this sort of period. “Study leave” makes it sound like taking up residence in the nearest library, “ministry leave” sounds like an extended holiday, and “sabbatical” is one of those churchy words which no one quite knows what it means. But I have enjoyed a chance to rest and be refreshed, the sort of renewing which one never quite gets to after a day off in the midst of a busy week or over a week’s holiday in the summer.

I began this period – OK, let’s call it “study leave” – by going straight from the busyness of the church weekend away to Bardsey Island, just off the north Welsh coast. As an island it is about as remote as it comes, half an hour’s boat ride from the mainland, with no electricity, few mod-cons and a lot of peace. I spent the week on retreat there with a group of friends, being silent during the day, and sharing faith, food and fun in the evenings.



Those of you who know me well would guess that long periods of silence aren’t my natural strong point! But there was something about the rhythm of the day - of encountering God in the beauty of nature, the quietness of walking and the company of friends – which was immensely rewarding. I walked in the steps of thousands of Bardsey pilgrims, finding peace and prayer there with equal measure. The story of the prodigal son – particularly through a picture and a novel - both fed my soul and inspired my thinking. And a recent conversation with a senior bishop reminded me of the importance of praying in tongues, which formed a greater part of my daily rhythm of prayer.

## The power of a good story



I’ve been able to read a fair bit – and not just “holy books.” But a couple of books in particular have reminded me of the power of scripture to transform, inspire and provoke. Whilst on Bardsey I read Walter Wangerin’s “The book of God” for the second time, a long retelling of the big story of scripture in narrative form. It’s particularly good on some of the more bewildering periods of OT history, as well as the background behind some of the gospel narratives. Then back at home I read Paula Gooder’s new 2018 book “Phoebe”, which tells something of the story of the early church and the writing of Paul through the eyes of Phoebe, one of the church’s first leaders. It’s a beautiful reminder of women and men in leadership, of pioneering new things in new situations, and the beautiful power of the local church when everyone gets to play their part.

## Conflict, anyone?

After the peace of Bardsey I went straight into a five day residential course hosted by “Bridgebuilders”, who do a lot with churches across the UK in areas of conflict resolution and mediation. I wonder how you view conflict? Something to be avoided at all costs? To be positively encouraged? Somewhere in-between? Over the days of the course we looked at examples of conflict in the Bible, some practical “tools” to lead in the midst of conflict, and what it might look like to be working for reconciliation with individuals and communities.



There's a lot to think through in this area, both within my own leadership and our church community. Our culture doesn't prepare us to deal well with conflict, and I know we haven't always lived with conflict well as a parish or a staff team. I was reminded how conflict is normal and inevitable, how important it is to lead wisely in the face of conflict, and how conflict might more often become constructive and life-giving in the life of the local church. I'm often reminded of Jesus being "full of grace and full of truth", and came away from the course renewed in my commitment to follow that path too.

## **Tourism of the Divine?**

Towards the end of this period I spent five days at Wells Cathedral in Somerset, joining the regular worshipping community there, and at my Bishop's request spending some time shadowing the Dean and reflecting on his role. For those days matins and sung evensong became the regular shape of life, and on the Sunday I got to "look the part" in joining the long procession of cathedral chapter clergy at the annual ordination service.

I'm not sure that senior leadership in a large medieval cathedral is necessarily my future, though even writing those words is fraught with danger! As Dean it does feel as if you need three months' notice to be spontaneous, an encyclopaedic knowledge of liturgical niceties, and a verger with their 'wand' to be five paces ahead of you in every moment of life.

I jokingly referred to cathedrals as "tourism of the divine", which was at first critical, but perhaps began to make sense too in a positive way. I'm reminded of the growth which some cathedrals are seeing, something of their offer of 'welcome, hospitality and spiritual experience' resonating with that which people are looking for today. Cathedrals are far from perfect – true of any church - but they do offer the 'sacred space' of the building, the regular rhythm of prayer and music, and the ability to be inclusive which make them sought after places in our increasingly secularised society.

I did however come away with the persistent question of how much of the gospel story is *implicit* in the very stones of the cathedral and the culture of the organisation, and how cathedrals might also be more *explicit* in speaking faith and living discipleship at the heart of our English cities. My longing – I hope shared - remains that we move further on this journey of "tourism of the divine" to find ourselves more fully at home as inhabitants of the kingdom of God. I really can't get away from Jesus' call to discipleship.

To a lesser extent we face these challenges in both the Trinity Centre and the Café. How might visitors know that there is something different about the life of Café Connect, there not just to serve great coffee and good food but also to be a place of faith, hope and love at the heart of the community. How might those who use the Trinity Centre experience Jesus and the gospel story, not just implicitly as the sliding door opens for them on the way in, but in ways which are more explicit and from which a response is provoked? Our buildings do tell an amazing story, but the gospel is surely also a spoken and inhabited story by the whole people of God. I wonder how might we encourage one another to be doing that more?

## **Church Planting**

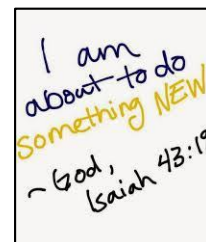
The final study I've been doing these last few days has been on church planting, and the current Anglican buzzword of the month of "resource churches." A House of Bishops statement came out last week, surprisingly short and readable at just six pages. And "behind it" was a lot of research, stories and discussion on church planting across the UK and further afield.

Of course all of our churches were once "planted." In Meole Brace that was probably over a thousand years ago. Those with slightly shorter memories will look to November 1999 for the planting of Christ the King at the heart of Radbrook Green, and more recently for various expressions of church taking place on the Meole Estate.



If you look over history there have been a number of eras of church planting, including the medieval times, the Victorian period, and the inter-war years. In C18 London Queen Anne committed to establishing fifty new churches during her reign, which is now being repeated by a bold vision from London Diocese to plant one hundred new worshipping communities over the next ten years. Queen Anne only got to about fifteen, though the diocese of London are now, I'm pleased to say, over halfway there to their target of 100 new expressions of C21 church!

And so I find myself wondering what we might learn from this. Perhaps we need enlarge our vision to see how we might see God's kingdom coming in Shrewsbury and this part of Shropshire? And might this be a "new thing"? As one of the larger churches in the area will we continue to be generous, giving away that which we have been given in terms of resources, energy and people? Can we work in partnership with others – across the denominations – to reach our town? Do we have a desire to humbly serve Shrewsbury and its churches, and the audacity and vision to do something new?



Worry not, this isn't a fully-fledged plan and a pin in the map on where this might happen. But it is a reminder of the pioneer spirit which I know is in the DNA of Trinity Churches, of the call to risk-taking which I want to both heed and lead, and God's invitation to be involved in the "new things" of the kingdom of God. I've talked increasingly these last months about the new housing developments in Shrewsbury, and how this will continue to change the face of our town as well as give new opportunities to reach out to new communities. I wonder whether, across the deanery, that is part of this calling?

My thanks again for the gift of this four week period. I'd love to chat more if you want to find out about various of these experiences, and as an extrovert thinker I dare say I'll grab some opportunities for some continued "processing" in sermons and other contexts. Meanwhile those who know sabbaticals usually work will be asking "I thought you'd be gone for twelve weeks." My current proposal is to have another four week period in summer 2019, and another four weeks in summer 2020, thus taking that twelve weeks over three years. This fits in well with various bits of training and leadership development which I'm doing nationally at the moment, and brings much-appreciated space and time to recharge the batteries, to develop skills, and to grow faith.

With thanks, as always, for the partnership we share in "living for Jesus, loving one another, and setting a table for the world."

Grace and peace

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Phil Cansdale". The signature is written in a cursive style and is underlined with a blue line.

Revd Phil Cansdale, Vicar