



Nazareth Letter June 2024
Revd Richard Carter

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The Long Walk to Freedom

I've found that there is always some beauty left — in nature, sunshine, freedom, in yourself; these can all help you. Look at these things, then you find yourself again (Anne Frank, The Diary of a Young Girl)

For to be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others. (Nelson Mandela)

Each year, as many of you will know, indeed as some of you have joined- a group of seventy and more pilgrims spend four days walking together to Canterbury. It's a hard call- because walking 74 miles in four days is often tough going, especially when your legs ache and your feet throb or blister and you seem to have been walking for hours and are unsure if you have enough inner battery to make the last five miles. And yet there are so many reasons to be a pilgrim, so many moments of revelation along the road. In journeys we can reconfigure our lives, walk or move things into place. You can, with faith, let go of those things that confine you and limit you and set out bravely into the unknown. I am aware of how so often our lives are confined by presumptions- unconsciously we are allowing ourselves to judge others by the criteria of job, status, house, wealth, education, nation, appearance, values etc. But on a pilgrimage, we are all pilgrims together.

At St Martin's we follow of course in the steps of Dick Sheppard who was Vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields and later Dean of Canterbury Cathedral, where he was buried. Dick Shepherd after the First World War, famously called St Martin's "The Church with the ever-open door" Dean David Monteith, in his words to us when we arrived at Canterbury Cathedral, talked about the need to continue to be those who open doors letting people both in and out. Pilgrimage itself does just that. It lets in and it lets out. It opens the door of our lives. That is our Nazareth spiritual path too, not to confine but to let in and out to open the doors of our Spirit. I think of the Good Shepherd who leads the sheep both in and out of the sheepfold and who calls us each by name.

At the end of the pilgrimage I spoke to one of our International Group pilgrims. A pilgrim who arrived in this country aged 9 and now is 29 and is still seeking asylum. "What did you like most about this pilgrimage?" I asked him. 'All my life' he said "I have been searching for freedom. In these last four days I found it. Freedom to find space and leave behind my fears, freedom to be equal and not pushed down by what people think of me, freedom to be

safe with others, to talk with everyone from all different places- freedom to be kind to one another, freedom in the way we were welcomed, freedom to belong” He told me that he had seen on someone’s t-shirt “Not everyone who wanders is lost” In fact we need to wander and wonder in order to discover. I used his words in the final service for they speak, I think to everyone. Everyone who feels trapped by feelings of not being good enough. Today he talked to me again and I glimpsed in his longing for freedom- years of exclusion- leaving country, leaving his loving grandparent, unable to speak English young and adrift, a care plan that didn’t work- a series of foster placements and then a children’s home, and a country where after nearly twenty years he still has no legal status and which threatened to send him back to a country he had left as a young child. Yet beneath all this trauma and suffering a goodness, an integrity, a quick insightful intelligence which can discern the real and the truthful- I see the longing to be accepted and belong even as he searches for the way out, as though preparing for rejection before it happens. Humanity with the beauty of a fawn ready to bolt. Isaiah describes the suffering servant as a bruised reed. And yet this is the one who will set us all free. This is the one who unmasks God- the Word made flesh- the one discovered in the tenderness of humanity- the open heart.

It is here in community and companionship- equal before God that we find human freedom: the ability to speak out and yes given the chance to open doors of trust and let others in and ourselves out. I am humbled by the suffering others hold within without murmur or complaint. There is a huge courage and resilience. “Have you ever walked like this before? I ask one man. “Yes” “I walked across 9 different countries to get to England, mostly on my own and at night.” As we walk together we glimpse the wells within each other. The places of fear and darkness and pain, failures and hurts within us all- but also the human spirit within- the springs of hope- the humanity that is our living water- deep within. We are **all** God’s children. We are not defined by the bruising- we can discover within each other the well spring of life. And sometimes through grace the pain of the bruising can also become the source of our compassion.

Opening the doors of friendship is a wonderful thing. We are all tangled up by fears of rejection, by feeling unloved, by being ultimately mortal and alone. But our journey is a journey home- to the place of unconditional acceptance and belonging. Pilgrimage teaches us that: our pilgrimage is to the place of forgiveness and healing and realising when we reach that place that we have in fact met it on the way and discovered it in one another and carried it within. The sacred place is the human heart. Nothing can be so human or sometimes so broken, nothing can be so divine. That’s what Jesus shows us- that this sacred heart, his sacred heart, belongs to everyone. No one is outside the love of God.

We are one body- St Paul says made up of many members- and each member of this body is in need of the other members- if one suffers, all suffer together, if one is honoured all rejoice together with it. To discover this is to discover the true freedom of our lives- not to live in alienation: what a beautiful thing it is when we live together in unity. We sing: “we are pilgrims on a journey and companions on the road; we are here to help each other walk the mile and bear the load” Nazareth provides the way of supporting others and ourselves on this journey.

After these four days of pilgrimage the temptation is to return to the dark again, it is easier for our pain to be hidden rather than exposed. Yet do we not carry in our own mortal bodies not only the death of Jesus but also his rising. And is it not in the places of our humbling and

rejection that we discover our real humanity. In the very struggle of our lostness we learn to hear the voice of the one who says: blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for what is right for they shall be filled. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the sons and daughters of God. It is those of us who stand in humility and need who will be the witnesses of the love and life greater than ourselves. It is here down here and in the desert of our struggles that the new song of God's redeeming love begins. We are not called out of the world but to go into the hidden places of darkness, anonymity, rejection and find Christ there—find the ineffable sacredness of every human face and the beauty of every human life. When we have the courage to open up I am struck that what we find beneath the wounds and the defences, is the longing for love. The place of innocence. What we discover is Christ.

I always knew that deep down in every human heart there is mercy and generosity. No one is born hating... Human goodness is a flame that can be hidden but never extinguished. (Nelson Mandela)

With my prayers Richard

Bible Passage: Corinthians 12.12-27

One Body with Many Members.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot were to say, 'Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear were to say, 'Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body', that would not make it any less a part of the body. If the whole body were an eye, where would the hearing be? If the whole body were hearing, where would the sense of smell be? But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. If all were a single member, where would the body be? As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you', nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.' On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honour to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together with it. Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

Wonderings

I wonder what freedom means to you

I wonder who you belong to

I wonder where your pilgrimage is to

I wonder how you find your way home

Website: I wanted to let you all know that the Nazareth Community and Companions of Nazareth now have their own website. I hope you will enjoy exploring it:
nazareth.community