

### On Reflection...

In many rural areas, the parish church represents the spiritual heart of the community. As Rural Adviser for the Diocese of Chelmsford, I have long advocated for churches to be left open for anyone seeking a peaceful moment of prayer or reflection. At times of distress, many people speak of sensing peace and comfort as they sit inside a quiet church. When 'lockdown' called for locked churches, it added to the loss felt in so many areas of our lives. Spiritual well-being sits in the depth of our beings. I often think of it as the soul's heart-beat that influences how we face the delights and challenges of life. In March, I sensed that maintaining our spiritual well-being would be essential as we faced this unprecedented pandemic. I was deeply concerned that our church buildings couldn't open to offer a place to pray.

As I reflected on this dilemma and listened to the announcements from the Prime Minister, I sensed a glimmer of possibility. We were being encouraged to take daily exercise. For those of us blessed with homes in the countryside, this could offer a daily connection with nature. Personally, I knew this daily commune with nature would be a mental and spiritual lifeline. I decided that whilst churches were closed I would write a weekly rural reflection inspired by my spiritual musings as I took my daily walks in the countryside. The government has given permission for churches to reopen for individual prayer from 13<sup>th</sup> June and so this will be the last Rural Reflection for the time being. It has been a pleasure to share them with you.

When we began lockdown, we had no idea how long it would last. Equally I had no idea how long I would be sending these reflections. I stepped out into the countryside with a slightly wobbly trust that God would inspire me with something to write each week! In preparation for this final reflection, I looked back on the 'series' and was struck by the breadth of spiritual themes that arose from the natural world. In this most challenging and unsettling of times, nature provided comfort, beauty, abundance, peace and many surprises. As my walking pace has slowed to take in the delights of nature, I've reminded myself that the word 'saunter' is derived from the French "à la saunte-terre", "to the holy ground". With gratitude, I humbly recognise that any ground is holy ground when we walk it with attentive prayerfulness.

You may recall a photograph of my cherry tree in blossom on Easter Sunday. Now it's on the cusp of yielding a harvest of delicious cherries.



Since Easter I've been watching the fruit form. Gradually the cherries are ripening. This tree produces delicious sweet cherries so I look forward to picking them soon! But I'm not alone in this. Greedy crows have already eyed them up and are making their intentions very clear. They have begun to peck and taste. Past experience has taught me that they can clear a tree in a few hours. It was clear that if this fruit was to reach its harvest peak, it needed protection.

So last week, I netted and added ugly strips of plastic bags to deter the crows. It isn't pretty but these cherries are precious! But as I stood back to look at my work, I was immediately reminded of a votive prayer tree I'd seen on holiday. In some parts of the world, precious trees are deemed as holy places. As visitors pray, they tie a ribbon to a branch. The tree becomes host to lots of ribbons representing all the prayers that have been said. As I write this final reflection, the 'ribbons' on my cherry tree represent my prayers for you all.



As we gradually move out of lockdown, it will be good to return to many aspects of life that we have missed. But as life becomes faster and busier, there is a danger that sauntering becomes a distant memory. I pray that you will find the space in your life to continue to saunter; to find delight, refreshment and renewal in the gifts freely offered to us in the countryside. I pray that you will be able to protect yourself from the things that could prevent you from reaching the spiritual harvest that God offers to us all. And I pray that in the words of Julian of Norwich, you will know in the depth of your soul that, "All shall be well".

The God of the sunrise, bring light to your life.  
The maker of orchids, surprise you with beauty.  
The creator of bluebells, surround you with peace.  
The God of creation, bless you and keep you, today and forever.

Amen

*Revd Janet Canon Nicholls*