

Dear All,

What an unprecedented couple years we have had since I first joined you as curate back in Summer 2020! There are a plethora of difficult things that I could select from the news – or indeed from our day to day lives - to reflect upon and consider from a spiritual perspective this month. There is the war in Ukraine, there is the cost of living crisis.....and of course Covid still looms large, with the current rates higher than ever. All of these things are extremely upsetting and they absolutely deserve our prayer, our active response and our deep compassion.

And yet, this month I feel compelled to avoid these major issues and focus on something entirely different. Today I've been thinking about something rather more cheerful; moments of unanticipated joy. The unexpected rather than the planned. By their very nature they're not something we can seek out. They just happen; reminding us again of our lack of control of the world around us but in a good way. This week I was at Wydale retreat centre on a course and I stayed there overnight. As I walked into the dining room for my evening meal, I spotted a good friend from theological college sitting alone at a table in the window. It turned out that, unbeknown to me, he was there on retreat for the week. We enjoyed an unexpected evening chatting and laughing together - it was so good to catch up on all of his news. Joy indeed!

It can also be very small things that bring us moments of joy, in fact it is frequently something small that changes our mood entirely. Whilst I was at Wydale walking through the gardens, I marvelled for some time over a bumble bee collecting 4 nectar from the heather and watched with delight as three hares ran across the lawn in front of me. The wildlife and the peacefulness of those gardens lifted my mood greatly. From a more day-to-day point of view, I'm sure I'm not alone in having my whole day transformed by an unexpected phone call or by something kind or encouraging someone says in passing. I'm not sure if 'expect the unexpected' is actually a motto that makes any sense, perhaps 'always be open to the unexpected' or 'don't hold on too tightly to your plans' might be better. However you put it though, it has certainly been my experience of life and of following God. As someone wise told me recently - "always remember to tell God your plans; he loves a good chuckle".

So if things take unexpected turns, both good and bad, what are we to do about it? Surely the point is that such things are out of our control? Well yes, but as with everything, we still have a choice to make about how we respond when the unexpected happens. I think we need to remain open to enjoying and seizing moments of joy, even when, according to our carefully laid out road maps, these things might seem to be taking us off course. At this time of the year I'm starting to think ahead to the story of the first Pentecost. The point when the disciples receive the Holy Spirit and are transformed and able to do all sorts of things that were previously unimaginable. I believe that the Holy Spirit works in all sorts of unexpected ways today, but sometimes we're so sure of our plans we can ignore all the amazing possibilities that are there in front of us. So of course we must be practical and plan, be good stewards of what we have and where we find ourselves, and have active compassion for those in need. But it would be so sad if that meant shutting ourselves off from the joy of the different, the excitement of the slightly crazy and the wonder of possibility. So may you be blessed with a bit of unexpected joy and possibility this month and may you seize it gladly with both hands.

Every blessing,

Laura