**Sabbatical Report**

Prior to my sabbatical, I set myself two main objectives. The first of these objectives, I anticipated, would be the easiest. This was to spend more time with my family – to rest and reconnect. It was for this reason that I chose to take my sabbatical during the summer months, knowing that my children would be on their school holidays.

I’m pleased to say that we shared many wonderful experiences. However, while we certainly reconnected, I can’t say that there was all that much rest! Having spent so much of my time having my attention pushed and pulled from one direction to the other, I often found myself awake at night and unable to sleep. I think my body craved those early hours of quiet solitude!

In all seriousness, though, I am so very grateful to have had this time to share with my family. We were fortunate enough to spend a week out of the country, and my children experienced their first time on an aeroplane and their first ride on a camel! While our holiday may not have got off to the best of starts - with our youngest successfully knocking out one of my wife’s front teeth on the very first day – the remainder of our holiday proved to be less eventful and far more enjoyable!

My other intention was to use my sabbatical to write prayers in response to the theme of doubt. In all honesty, while I felt compelled to take on this task, I wasn’t entirely sure what the results might be. Would these prayers be useful for personal devotions, form part of an act of worship, or perhaps be entirely useless? One thing that quickly became obvious was that having the children home from school for 6 weeks made any attempt at writing a whole lot more difficult!

My own story of faith likely inspired the adoption of doubt as a theme. In a nutshell, I was baptised as an adult and became part of a worshipping community whose faith was neatly packaged and well presented. There was no room for doubt because every question had a clear answer. Certainty was a comforting friend until that certainty started to fray. Following a particularly difficult experience, any certainty I did have fell through the floor and I was left picking up the pieces. I had to reimagine what faith could look like because life had pulled me far beyond the boundaries of my past experience.

Since that time, I have encountered many others who have found themselves struggling to hold on to their faith, albeit for many different reasons. Many have chosen to leave the Church because, accompanied by their doubts and uncertainties, they no longer experience church communities as places in which they belong or feel welcome.

As I began writing these prayers, I imagined them as something of a resource for those who carry the weight of their questions – making space for a sort of *Holy Doubters Club*. My aim is to assemble a number of prayers (accompanied by short reflections & open-ended questions) and make them available to be engaged with in groups or individually. When we encounter doubt, my hope is that it doesn’t become a barrier to our worship but might instead open us up to a more honest relationship with, and bigger experience of God.

I’d envision a *Holy Doubters Club* to be somewhere to belong for those whose questions have not been welcomed, whose faith sometimes feels threadbare, and whose honesty has remained unspoken. Those whose faith is far from neatly packaged and well-presented might then find themselves included, valued and receiving the welcome they had hoped for.

Nevertheless, if the prayers I have written find no use beyond my own engagement, then I remain thankful for the time I have been able to devote to reading, writing and reflecting. It has been a privilege.

With trepidation, I return to Circuit ministry and, perhaps more daunting, the school runs too!

**Examples of Prayers**(Questions not yet composed)

**‘Here I am’**

The gospel narratives make no secret of the disciples’ misunderstandings, and neither is their doubt covered up. In fact, it is plain as day.

When we find ourselves staring into uncertainty, we find ourselves in good company.

Our doubt doesn’t disqualify us from the company Jesus kept, it puts us right at the centre.

*Verses*
Matthew 28:16-17

*Prayer*God of the doubtful,
the disciples’ disbelief
fills me with joy.

Their doubt was worth remembering
because there would be others,
and here I am.

Here I am
alongside those first witnesses
who saw but could not see.
They are friends to me.
Amen.

**‘Stranger’**

We do not need to be the heroes of our own stories.

The story of the Good Samaritan (as it is often titled) does all sorts of things.

One thing it can do is save us from believing that we are the ones who must carry every blessing and every answer into all situations.

Instead, Jesus' story telling points us toward those who we tell ourselves we are nothing like, that we might find ourselves blessed as we learn from those we have known only as strangers.

In part, it's a story about humility as we learn to receive from people & places we have previously neglected, and as we find God at work among them.

*Verses*
Luke 10:25-37

*Prayer*
Jesus on the other side,
lead me into the wilderness
of other peoples’ lives,
that grace would catch me
and confound me.

Help me to learn from those
I know only as strangers,
that their lives might bless me
in ways I cannot yet know.
Amen.

**‘Being With’**

Comfort can come alongside certainty, but too often this is only true for those who think of themselves as being certain.

For those who have questions - personal and sometimes painful questions - another person's certainty can be a harmful thing.

When we are too quick to think we know the answer to another person's question, we risk saying the wrong thing with every good intention. If we're lucky, we might be quick to realise that our knowledge isn't always that helpful in practice.

Complex situations rarely produce simple explanations.

Coming alongside someone in the messiness of life - without needing to rush everything to a neat conclusion (as though that were desirable, necessary, or even possible) - can prove to be a far greater commitment.

It is a privilege to be invited to share in someone else's personal and sometimes painful questions. It is arrogance to think that we hold all the answers.

It's the strange art of remaining present while also getting out of the way, and we're all still learning.

*Verses*
Job 6:2-4
Job 16:2

*Prayer*
God who sees and understands,
help us to know our limitations,
that our presence would heal
rather than wound.

When there are questions,
let us not rush to answer,
but share in not knowing.

May our presence
leave space for you.
Amen.