

### **Minister's letter. September 2017.**

Hello- Well, here we are in September. Where did the Summer holidays go and where has this year gone? What fun I have had in the past few weeks- chaotic and madly busy, at times, but such fun!

August brought our German visitors to Newport Pagnell and as well as a packed programme and lots of food, we also joined in the West End Afternoon Cream Tea event which was a great success and a blessing to all who came. Following the German visit we had the Bouncy Castle sessions in Church at Newport and fortunately chose the rainiest week of the holidays and so got virtually all sessions booked up and not only did we provide the local families with something dry and child-energy sapping, but we made money to go towards the heating costs for Winter! I also had a wedding (at Furtho Farm on the A509 and such a day of blessing and joy). Then onto the Holiday Club in Newport Pagnell with up to 160 children enjoying Polar Explorers and crafts and fun. Then a little calm before the Greenbelt Festival. I will bore you all, I am sure, with stories of things that happened at Greenbelt, but suffice it to say it was another inspirational weekend and one I would love to see people from both West End and Newport Pagnell coming to next year- as campers or day visitors. You will not experience anything else as amazing as the Sunday morning Communion service, this year led by those normally passed over: a lady who cannot leave her house due to ME (live linked to the service!), a girl with cerebral palsy doing the main address, those with learning disabilities doing the drumming, the L'Arche community leading prayers and so much more. It really was a 'be there' moment. PLEASE ask me about it and look up the festival on [www.greenbelt.org.uk](http://www.greenbelt.org.uk)

In between all this excitement and fun, as well as the conversations and encounters, the opportunity for photos and a sense of blessing, I also led a Bible Study on the books of Esther and Ruth. I led this on two sessions in the week over 4 weeks and although only 8 other people from both churches came along to join me, we had a brilliant time and I enjoyed myself- hoping others did too! We began by addressing the fact that, in churches, we often feel everyone knows more than we do about the Bible and so are often loath to offer our own thoughts and ideas. We also have an unspoken way of communicating that there is a scale of being Christian and we often feel we come at the bottom of the scale and others are 'above' us. We talked about the hidden messages church can give and how we can dispel some of the myths and fallacies. We are all loved and worthy in God's eyes- so why do we insist on finding ourselves lacking?

\*Greenbelt Name Drop Alert.....\* When I saw the Revd Kate Bottley (she of Googlebox fame), she spoke of the way we judge ourselves and judge others and find fault and how great it would be if we could be more accepting of ourselves and others. She spoke of affirmation instead of criticism. (She was absolutely brilliant and entertaining and her prayer to close the session was gentle and precious.) John Bell (of the Iona Community) was also an inspirational speaker who talked about the effect that the church has had on some young people who are being taught that to be gay is a sin and that God cannot love them as they are. He spoke of the suicide of one such young girl and her death has caused him to speak out about the discrimination and poor theology driving the idea that God does not love certain people. We need to hear and share that God loves everyone, unconditionally (and one lady I met at Greenbelt spoke to me of this radical love and how it changed her whole life). God may not like how we behave when we hurt others and destroy the world and relationships, but God loves us because we are each made in the image of the one who created us. John Bell said that we need to speak out as church communities when people are being hurt and when injustices are happening around us because if we do not speak out then our silence means we are complicit. If we do not protest about injustices and poor interpretations of the Gospel message of LOVE, then we are condoning the things that are going on.

So much is going on in the world that fills us with sadness and fear. The only way things will change is by people like us speaking out. The only way things can change is because we say 'enough is enough' and we make our voices heard. This is hard. We are frightened of what the consequences may be, we do not have enough time, we may feel we do not have enough knowledge or information, we may think it is up to others and our time has passed to do such things. BUT....Jesus told us to take up our cross and walk. Not stand still and rest on our laurels,

but walk. Not take the easy path and find personal salvation and forget about the world we are called to live in. Jesus called us to follow him, to Walk the Way, the way of peace and justice. Over the years churches have done so much that has transformed society- education, conscience raising, speaking out about slavery and oppression, given hope and help and healing. But also the church has been complicit in allowing things to happen that go against the teachings of Jesus and the messages in the Bible. John Bell spoke of the Rampant Heterosexuality of the church: historical male-dominated thinking and acting and teaching that sidelines people and allows poor treatment of others, all this needs challenging and changing. We have a society in which many still do not know of the grace of God and have never heard of Jesus; we have a society that knows very little about the stories in the Bible that are part of our history and our heritage and have a lot to offer us in terms of helping us to make sense of the world in which we live and the lives we lead and the relationships we can develop and benefit from. So what do we do?

I came home from Greenbelt reminded that we need to make sure we care for those already part of our church communities (and make sure that people are visited and contacted and listened to and loved); but realise we then need to look outwards to those locally and nationally and globally. Already we support projects in financial ways, we support the Foodbank, and we commit to help local and national charities and groups. But how much actual speaking out about issues do we do? Do we protest, write letters, stand up and be counted, express ourselves on social media about persecution or prejudice? Or do we leave that up to others because (delete as appropriate) a) we are too busy b) too old c) not sure where to address it to d) think someone else will do it e) can't be bothered really, cos I am OK? Let us be honest- we can probably say yes to at least two of those! But if the church was so important that people like Stephen were prepared to be martyred for it, that Jesus decided to call a man to step out to build it, that many people throughout the centuries have been a part of it and it has changed lives and society and opinions and views, how come we can be a part of it now and not have the same fervour and determination and passion? Jesus gave his life to show us the overwhelming and abundant and amazing love of God- what do we do in return? Find the easy way? Settle for personal transformation and hope someone else does the hard stuff? Jesus never said it would be easy, but he did call us ALL to step out and speak up and be the voice of the voiceless and the hope for the hopeless and love the unloveable. And he did this knowing it isn't easy. But he stretched out his arms and showed us we were loved 'this much'!

So what do we do now? We seek to be heard and seen and counted. However we can.

Remembering that silence is interpreted as our being complicit.

*'If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.'*

Desmond Tutu. *'The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil but because of those who look on and do nothing.'* Albert Einstein.

May God grant us ways to be thankful for our blessings, to find ways to build up and support each other and to speak out on the things we see around us that go against the love of God and against the building up of society. AMEN.

September 17th 100 years ago, the first woman in England was ordained as a minister in the Congregational Church. Her name was Constance Coltmann. Along with her husband Claud, she was minister to an East End project that was part of the Kings Weigh House (Congregational Church), they then went to Kilburn, Cowley Road Oxford, Wolverton Bucks, Haverhill Suffolk and back to Kings Weigh House. As she was minister in Wolverton (and was the first woman who trained for ministry at Mansfield College Oxford) and I am currently minister in Wolverton and was the last woman to train for ministry at Mansfield College, plus we have Joan and Betty who remember Constance and Claud as their minister and Jenny R had the main photo of Constance now being used by the URC as publicity, I have spoken on the radio and been published in a magazine (Women Alive!) about women in ministry. One interview in on the URC website and I have a copy of the article, if you are interested. We were groundbreaking in our history- let us celebrate this month!!