**Wrenbury & Nantwich Mission Area Methodist Churches **

**Newsletter No 16 12 July 2020**

The 4th of July is a significant day in history, American Independence Day, celebrated annually by many. Most of you probably won’t remember but it was the 4th July 1990 that England lost to Germany on penalties and went out of the world cup. I watched the match, which went into extra time finishing at 9.40 pm and at 10pm my daughter Ruth was born!!

Last week I shared one of my “significant days in history”, my ordination, well I guess like many others becoming a parent can change your life forever. We look to others, who have been our role models. What can we learn from how we have seen others bring up their children? I guess I made a conscious decision to do things differently to what I had experienced myself. Birthdays have become special days, always having to make, not buy, a cake as I had very specific requests such as 2 elephants holding pink and blue balloons, blue fairy castles, green and yellow Mr Blobby ……….. We always marked it with a party usually at home, or occasionally in church halls with loads of people and often a bouncy castle.

We reminisced over the weekend how my dad , whenever he paid a visit, did an “inspection” of house and garden. He never seemed to notice the things I’d done, more the things that hadn’t been done, the weeds in the garden……

With Covid 19 restrictions birthday celebrations this year have been on a much smaller scale than originally planned, with me hosting a family party in the garden of the manse. Although mum and dad are no longer with us, “inspections” seem to have passed to my brother in law. It really doesn’t help having a family who spend a lot of time gardening when I don’t ! During lockdown so many people have spent so much time in their gardens, transforming them into a place of beauty. Not me! It doesn’t help being in Wolves for a number of weeks.

A couple of months ago I was visited by moles, who kindly left a trail of mole hills around the garden. In preparation for the party I thought I better try and do something about them so have flattened them and scattered grass seed to try to cover all the bare patches. Word got out to the local pigeons of Nantwich who gathered on the roof ready to feast. They didn’t even flinch when I banged on the window or went out to shoo them off. Little seed has survived as I still have my bare patches.

With a little help from friends, cutting the hedge, power washing slabs, repairing the picnic bench and purchasing a few plants, I’m pleased to say I passed the “inspection” (which really did happen!)

Worrying over the garden I realised I hadn’t given any thought to a cake this year and hadn’t received a request. As rainbows have been so significant this year I made a rainbow cake with layers of green, yellow, red and orange sponge, with a union jack of fruit on top. I was in such a rush and it was so warm, the butter cream was melting and fruit slipping off. It has to go down in history as the worst birthday cake I have ever made. Despite all the stress of garden and cake we had a really lovely day.

Today’s gospel reading is the really well known parable of the sower. Just like what happened to me as I generously scattered seed, I was feeding the local bird population. The same thing happened in the story Jesus told. We read how the seed fell on different types of path, but before that think about the farmer/sower/gardener. He didn’t go out and carefully place each seed into a prepared container, He took handfuls and generously scattered them. But it was a wasteful generosity as the majority of it did not grow as it was eaten by birds, scorched by the sun or choked by weeds. The farmer would have known the risks, the waste, but did it anyway.

There is still a challenge for us today. Could the seeds represent our love and time for people today? The majority of us are usually very cautious and selective about who we invest our time with. It’s usually, but not always, easier to spend our time and give our love to our families, children and grandchildren. There are many laws and rules within the bible but Jesus summed it up simply in the greatest commandment ***“Love God and Love your neighbour as yourself”*** That didn’t literally mean our next door neighbours, but everyone.

Going back to Hull again, I believe we took handfuls of love and grace and dished it out unconditionally to so many people, who others would have written off, or crossed the street to avoid. We knew a lot of it would be wasted, that some people were just taking advantage of our generosity, that some people had no desire or intention to change. It wasn’t our job to calculate the yield, just to keep scattering. We started off with our “Street Banquet”, inviting anyone who was hungry to come and have lunch with us on a Sunday. Our first week we had 56 “guests” peaking at 109 and averaging around 75. People generously gave of their time and money to feed so many people every week. As in many cities there are soup kitchens around and places you can get free food if you know where to look. I didn’t want to become just another soup kitchen, hence the name banquet. We had table cloths and flowers on the tables, left invitations around the city in hostels, welcomed people, hugged them, remembered their names and the stories they had shared. Volunteers sat at the same tables and shared conversations and ate lovely homemade food served with vegetables and salads. Some people came and ate and left once they’d had anything free we had to give, but some stayed to talk and had a genuine desire to change their lives.

Some of our “guests” (mainly homeless or addicts) came to help with the prep, peeling potatoes, unloading my car, setting up tables and washing up……….

I soon learnt and tried to instil in all the volunteers that we should love and respect everyone, but trust no one. I repeatedly used the line in the Lord’s prayer with volunteers *“Lead us not into temptation”.*  The majority of our guests’ lives were deep rooted in crime, if they could see something they could nick they would just out of habit. Volunteers were told not to bring bags, money and phones if they could help it as it was too great a temptation. Things like coffee, sugar, teaspoons, toilet rolls were constantly being pinched, so we just found ways of restricting what was left out. As we got to know some of our guests, we put them in charge of serving the drinks and monitoring the toilets … (poacher-turned-gamekeeper principle) which worked really well. The 4 ft and a bit 60-year-old prostitute who came to my ordination became one of my “gamekeepers”. She knew all the tricks of the trade and knew who and what to watch out for.

The police and city council learnt of what we were doing, and saw for themselves that we were doing something different, it wasn’t just “**handouts**” but **“hands up**”. The police would regularly drop in for a brew themselves, they knew if they were looking for someone there was a good chance they were with me! The first time they came in and saw Ishia serving drinks they were totally amazed. She was the longest serving prostitute in the City, well known to the police, and had been in and out of prison all her life. She was so proud to tell the police she was working for me, that she wanted to change her life, she’d even asked if she could be baptised.

As time went on, we developed what we were offering. The church was open every day for people to drop in for food, a shower, prayer or to share their news. We ran Alpha courses, not only at church but got invited into the hostels. We also ran a Christian 12 step recovery program, clothes bank, job club and debt centre. The church became the heartbeat of a chaotic community as seeds of love were thrown out every week. Some seed fell on good soil and became deeply rooted and have flourished, such as Graham. Graham was originally from Stoke, a very intelligent man who had worked for Microsoft and military intelligence but was bipolar. When he was high he could consume so much work, but then would have a manic episode and crash and lose everything: family, friends, home and job. He still doesn’t know how he was found in a pool of his own blood in Queens Gardens Hull. He was discharged from hospital to a homeless hostel, where I first met him and invited him to join Alpha. Initially he refused saying he was an atheist, but as there was nothing else on offer that night he sat at the back with his hood up never saying a word. He came every week, sat at the back with his hood up. The week we looked at how to read the Bible I would take Bibles in to give to anyone who wanted them. Graham took a bible and read it from cover to cover, memorising most of it! The head knowledge became heart knowledge as he became a Christian, having a personal relationship with Jesus. He was baptised and is now sharing his testimony and running Alphas in the homeless hostels of Hull.

Many others have started on the 12 steps program, wanting to be free of their addictions, but have been scorched as they have been easily tempted away by others. It really opened my eyes to see for myself how some people just don’t want others to succeed, they want to keep them tied to their life of self destruction and addiction, they are like the thorns that overwhelm the tender new shoots.

Don’t be discouraged when you don’t see the fruits of your labour in other people’s lives. It’s our job to continually be radically generous with our love for others, and leave the rest to God.

With love and prayers Deacon Jill.