

### **Thursday 31<sup>st</sup> December**

New Year's Eve: the final day of 2020. What a wonderful year it's been: people have slowed down instead of rushing about, have enjoyed the beautiful British outdoors more, looked at things more carefully, spent longer just talking to each other outside when they can, taken care of their neighbours, volunteered, gone the extra mile at work, learnt to do interesting things through the amazing technology we possess, and so much more. When limited in seeing friends and family, we've learnt to be even more thankful for them when we do.

We've learnt to be even more grateful for the work of scientists. We've had the opportunity to reflect on the topic that more than anything can lead us to deeper maturity, the fragility of life, while being even more thankful for the gift of life itself. 'Rejoice always,' says St. Paul in the New Testament. He knew the secret of life: to understand that life is not a right, but the gift of a loving God. When you know that, nothing can dim your joy. So I wish you all a very peaceful or joyful end to the year, whatever is appropriate to your own understanding of life.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> December**

Today, I visited a churchyard. The low winter sun was enough to beautify the south side of the church and illuminate the whole church yard, making its appearance as pleasing as the architect had intended; it felt good just to be in such a tranquil setting. Many years ago, when I lived near the centre of a city, I discovered the local cemetery helped me to pray. It had been hopelessly overgrown, but the city council had cleared it and maintained it well. Sitting on one of the benches, I found easy to get life in perspective: a great way to settle into prayer quickly. I'm not sure why it was so effective, but I think it was because I was being brought up against the transitory nature of human life. We can worry and fuss about that if we like, fearful of what the future might hold, which is another stupid waste of energy. It's better if we allow it to lead us to the place Jesus encouraged: to live in the present. We don't know what tomorrow will bring, so let's just live the best we can for today, leave tomorrow in His hands, and relax.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> December**

Enjoying a short walk round the village I passed the small menagerie containing deer, and varieties of sheep and wildfowl. For many months the pond in the centre has been empty, I don't know whether because of a leak or the dry spring and early summer. Today it was full to the brim, and I was delighted to see four ducks swimming on it. Maybe I was imagining it, but they seemed extremely happy, 'because,' I thought, 'at last they are in their natural element.' We are fortunate indeed if we spend our lives living and working in our natural element: in the environment best suited to our temperament doing the work that most fits our talents. But work itself, caring duties, finances, illness, or lack of opportunity, can compel us to spend our lives, or part of them, living and working in situations opposed to our desires. In those circumstances our biggest mistake will be to waste our energy bemoaning our lot, instead of thanking God for the challenge, and praying for the grace to follow the advice of scripture to 'be content with what we have,' and waiting for our pond, in God's good time, to fill up.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> December**

Today is Holy Innocents' Day, remembering the baby boys under two killed by Herod in Bethlehem when the Magi told him about a new king, born in Bethlehem when the star signifying his birth had appeared. Warned by God in a dream, Joseph had already taken Mary and Jesus to safety in Egypt. The loss of a child seems the hardest to bear. My heart goes out to all who have suffered it and I understand why it drives many people away from God. In contrast, though, I once spent several weeks visiting a new estate where a new church was being built. People were friendly but one afternoon I was getting nowhere. No-one was interested and, unusually, no-one invited me in. Cold and damp, I nearly went home but tried one more house. I was met with warmth, interest and friendship and a cup of tea, but I heard a heartbreaking story. The couple had had two daughters. One died in infancy and the other aged fourteen. Yet instead of turning away from God, they had turned towards him in faith and trust despite all, and had found His peace. They became committed members of the new church.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> December**

Today is the feast day of John, Apostle and Evangelist. John is one of the most important figures in the New Testament. John's gospel tells us things the other three don't and gives us a different way of looking at Jesus and who he was. It is a profound and challenging piece of writing that has brought many people to faith and strengthened the belief of others. The gospel talks about a figure called "the beloved disciple" who is usually assumed to be John himself, showing us that he was very close to Jesus, the only one of the Twelve to stand by his cross. The tradition is that he lived into his nineties, and spent his last years in Ephesus leading the church in that area of the world, including in combatting heresy. There is a lovely story told about him that when he was very old, he would be carried out to address the brethren, who were not as impressed as you might think, because he always said the same thing, "Little children, love one another," which is one of the keynote themes of his gospel and New Testament letter. But what better message could anyone keep giving?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> December**

Today is the feast of St Stephen, the day on which 'good King Wenceslas looked out.' Stephen had been appointed as one of six administrators to sort out a sad racist spat that had arisen, the Greek speaking members of the church claiming that the Jewish widows were being given preferential treatment to theirs in the charitable distribution of food. These church assistants were wisely chosen as men 'full of the Spirit and of wisdom', and Stephen stood out as 'full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and grace and power,' so his effect went beyond administrative duties to performing 'great wonders and signs among the people.' This provoked the fury of the church's opponents and Stephen was falsely accused of blasphemy, that most deadly weapon of autocratic regimes. Fearlessly, he gave testimony to his faith at his trial, culminating in proclaiming a vision of Jesus standing at God's right hand. They instantly lynched him by stoning. Like his Master, he forgave his attackers and committed his spirit to the Lord. He died the first martyr for the Christian faith and a martyr for freedom. Pray for our government. It would be so easy to lose the freedom we cherish.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> December**

Making Christmas monologue videos for the Deanery Facebook page has brought us up against a lot of technological challenges over the last few days resulting in my staring at a computer screen for far too long, so this morning I decided I had to get a good walk in to clear my head and set out for the nearby town five miles along the local rail trail. From the forecast I anticipated the very cold headwind and heavy showers, but the hail stinging my face was an unpleasant shock, and nearly turned me round. When the bright winter sun emerged, though, lighting up the brilliant green lichen on the hedgerow shrubs and the late deep red berries still on the hawthorn, and after the privilege of conversation with three people, and when I felt so invigorated on arrival, it became so much worth the little trials of wind and hail. Mary and Joseph travelled eighty plus miles to Bethlehem, possibly partly on foot, the Wise Men hundreds of miles. I hope you have a very blessed Christmas, a season of goodwill to remember that going the extra mile to bring peace and joy to someone else is always worth it.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> December**

There is something profoundly moving for me about Christmas Eve. So many images come to mind: as a boy looking out of the window onto the front garden being coated by softly falling snow lit by the street lamp; a crowd of us carol singing in the cold followed by a couple of hour's recuperation at home by a blazing fire drinking Bovril tasting like the elixir of life before heading for a church packed to the rafters with people singing carols at the top of their voices at midnight communion; telling the same made up bedtime story annually to my children about a mistake made but put right by Santa; being Santa in the early hours enjoying the mince pie, drink and carrot left by my children: all of it hallowed the simple fact that despite all the hardships faced by Mary and Joseph, the baby was born, the light come into the world, so that when we face hardships we know that like the forgotten present in my made up story, it will be put right, because we have a God who has come to be alongside us, love us, hold us, and ultimately save and heal us.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> December**

I had to use de-icer on my car, the first time this winter. The iced-up windscreen reminded me of more winter nostalgia. With neither central heating nor double glazing, the condensation on my bedroom windowpanes as a child would freeze, producing beautiful patterns, each one unique. Although I did appreciate and enjoy these as a boy, my enthusiasm was tempered on the days I had to get out of bed for school. I would be clutching the bedding under my chin, steeling myself until I had to leap out of bed, throw on some clothes, and race downstairs hoping that the morning fire had taken hold enough to warm our "living room". It's too easy to see the past through "rose tinted spectacles," and it can be destructive. Mourning the loss of frost patterns and open fires might block my thankfulness for warmth throughout my home without a mucky grate to clean. It's delightful to meditate on precious memories of the past, and it can be healing, too. But dwelling on it can block the all-important thankfulness for the present moment, a thankfulness which transforms us. What simple thing are you thankful for at this moment?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> December**

Even though the earth is now rolling southwards, it is still cold, dark and wet: winter is upon us. As a child I loved winter nights round our open coal fire. I liked to draw the curtains myself, and sit with the family, maybe playing a game, our fronts roasted by the heat, never mind the cold draughts on our backs (double glazing didn't exist). My favourite food was marmite plastered thick on slightly (or even well) burnt toast done on the fire on an old toasting fork. A special treat would be to stick a piece of cheddar on the fork and melt it over the fire. I didn't consider it done properly unless it had fallen at least twice and had the ashes scraped off. Visiting a 5,000 year old village on Orkney a few years back, we were shown, in the remains of their stone aged homes, how important the hearth was: the meeting place for family and friends, warmed by the fire, being together, with no distractions: just each other in love and fellowship. I wonder if such undistracted opportunities are disappearing from our lives, and diminishing us? If you have them, protect them.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 21<sup>st</sup> December**

Today in the Northern hemisphere, twenty-first December at 1.30pm, it is the winter solstice. I always enjoy knowing this, because it means the earth is starting to roll southwards. From now on, the nights will get lighter and the days longer, beckoning Spring. In Roman times the solstice was on or around 25th December, which is why Pope Gregory chose that date to celebrate the birth of Christ. Jesus was born into a dark world, full of fear, disease, superstition, and the Romans were brutal masters. Like the day of the solstice, nothing changed immediately. He didn't begin his ministry for thirty years, so it didn't make much difference to begin with. But it made a difference to those who knew: Mary, Joseph, their family, the shepherds, the wise men. From his birth they will have been full of hope that light was coming into the darkness, and eventually it came, as Christianity transformed the world. You won't feel the earth changing direction today, but if you know it has, it will lift your hope of spring. Always take your moments of darkness to Jesus. He will make a difference. Hold on to that hope. Never let it go.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December**

Today I was able at last to see family, outdoors. It was lovely to chat and catch up, but we were of course not allowed to hug each other as we normally would. I think the deteriorating mental health of our country is partly caused by our not being allowed to touch other people unless they are part of our household. Touch is an important language of love. A hand laid on a shoulder, a light touch on a forearm, can convey more sympathy, care and understanding than a dozen words. A simple handshake bestows respect, acceptance, forgiveness even. We are human beings who need each other. Bereft of the healing power of touch we are lost, at sea, struggling to see light ahead. Its loss is saddening and lessening me. Yet the privilege of being able to meet dear ones today reminded me that every single meeting with another person is a privilege, whether friend, family or stranger, and I must always treat it as such, because, as C.S. Lewis perceptively saw, 'next to the blessed sacrament, your neighbour

(meaning the person in front of you at any one time) is the holiest object presented to your senses.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> December**

Because of Covid, I have been sending vouchers as Christmas presents to so many people I cannot meet, so today was the first occasion I have actually wrapped presents. Christmas presents often remind me of the privilege I had many years ago of having a Christian priest from India helping at our church. He was spending a year studying at a theological college and he had no means of returning home just for the Christmas holiday, so he lived in our parish. We should all spend time with people from developing countries. It gets life in perspective. My children had one of those children's cassette recorders: that many children had back then. They were not expensive. I can still see my new Indian friend turning it over and over in his hands in astonishment at coming to a country where a piece of electronic recording equipment was so common that a version of it was produced as a toy for children. There was no jealousy or resentment; just amazement at being in a country where ordinary families had such things. It reminded me how much we in the developed world take our wealth for granted. And constantly seek for more.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> December**

A few days ago I was staring at the sea for a while. As the grey waves rollicked and rolled up the beach, I thought how much being an island race affects our view of the world. I have been more aware of this in the very few years I have lived near the sea, having for all of my life previously lived near the North-South central line of the country about two hours from it. It is said that being islanders makes us very independent, exemplified by our lack of desire to learn other languages. When I travelled abroad as a young man, I was disturbed that people I met overseas said the British were cold and unfriendly. Thankfully, I now live among people I find to be very friendly indeed. I think of the poet John Donne's well known verse: 'No man is an island, entire unto itself.' Today's world encourages us to be independent. With a car and a computer and enough money we can exist without depending on our neighbour at all, but perhaps without 'loving our neighbour,' even. So what will be our 'neighbours'' testimony of us at the end of our lives?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> December**

People are saying they don't feel 'Christmassy' this year, because of the restrictions. I understand that feeling, but was much uplifted today by finishing writing Christmas cards to the background of a CD of carols. Carols have been one of our nation's greatest spiritual assets: known and loved by people whether they attend church or not. Our traditional carols combine meaningful poetry with great music, with an occasional excellent newcomer making an appearance. I am so missing the opportunity to sing them inside our churches or outside in the streets, especially now that a sort of (for me perverse and absurd) political correctness has robbed us of the joy of hearing them in shops. So today I thank God for radio stations and TV channels that still broadcast them, and I shall saturate my ears with carols from them and CDs, and sing them in my home and in the countryside. Surely, in these days of us all feeling

low at times, some folk badly so, nothing can be more therapeutic than the story of there coming to earth a God who 'feeletth for our sadness, shareth in our gladness', when in the 'dark streets' of Bethlehem there 'shineth the everlasting light'.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> December**

Further to yesterday's Thought, way back in 1603 on the 17<sup>th</sup> December, the remarkable astronomer Johannes Kepler, the Imperial mathematician and Royal Astronomer in Prague, noticed that the planets Jupiter and Saturn were in conjunction in the constellation of Pisces, producing the appearance of a single brilliant star. After some calculations he discovered that the same event would have occurred in 6BC. There was no clear dating system in the West until a Scythian monk, Dionysius Exiguus was given the task of creating one in 525AD, which we still use. Dionysius was about 5 years out, which puts Jesus' birth at 5BC, very near to Kepler's Calculations. (Modern scholars guess about 4 BC). Jupiter signified royalty, Saturn was the guardian planet of Israel, and Pisces was associated with the Messiah. The two planets, however, were probably not as close as Kepler thought, and there is now support for the Bethlehem star being an extraordinary phenomenon recorded by the Chinese in 4 BC, possibly a nova or comet. It can be quite exciting, investigating all this history, but nothing is as exciting as the Lord Jesus Christ when he comes today, to meet with any of us, whoever we are, and forgive and love us into his Kingdom.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> December**

Waking feeling stuffy I returned to my pre-breakfast walk routine. The Eastern sky was just starting to light up and Venus dominated the scene, shining clear and low against a back drop coloured by pale blue and yellow just becoming distinguishable from the darkness. I thought of the excitement of The Wise Men, seeing a brilliant new star in the sky shining bright. It couldn't have been Venus, or any star they were familiar with. They would have been astrologer astronomers, the two disciplines merging in the ancient world, when astronomers, who were surprisingly knowledgeable, saw significant meaning in the movement of stars and planets. So the question has challenged all thinking people since then: Was it a miracle: an extra temporary moving star placed in the sky by God and removed after it had achieved its purpose of taking those men to Bethlehem? Or was it a natural phenomenon: a comet, a conjunction of planets, or a supernova (explosion of a star). Whatever inspired the Wise Men, they were intelligent, persistent seekers after the truth. I thank God for intelligent men and women who seek the truth today: scientists, historians, geographers, economists, philosophers, psychologists, and I hope I respect them also.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 14<sup>th</sup> December**

Today as I write, on the 13<sup>th</sup> December, it is the feast day of the Spanish mystic John of the Cross (1542 -1591). He joined the Carmelite order and worked with St Teresa to reform it, stressing the need for it to abandon its comfortable ways. In this he was partly successful, but at one point he was imprisoned by his opponents for 9 months. This must have been a great trial to him as he loved nature and the outdoors, but in prison he devoted himself to prayer and he recorded his visions in beautiful mystical writing. His most famous work is his Dark

Night of the Soul in which he describes how a mystic must lose all detachment to earthly possessions and pass through an experience of the Passion of Christ. He taught that in order to be close to God we also needed God's grace and an experience of public humiliation. He died a hermit, rejected.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December**

We have just been watching an excellent DVD. Towards the end we had a break and I made hot chocolate, and fancied a plain rice cake with it. We started the film again but I stopped it realising I must have left the rice cake in the kitchen. But there was no sign of it. So I searched the lounge. Not there. Back to the kitchen. Slow search. Nothing. I paused to consider the mystery of it vanishing into thin air, and suddenly realised the only place it could be. We were sitting in very low lamplight, in which a rice cake would look like one of our rush-matting coasters, and sure enough, there it was underneath my mug of chocolate! I was relieved I hadn't coated it in honey or marmite. In this season of Advent we remember Christ's promise to come again and shine light in our darkness. On that glorious day, all the mysteries of life will be made plain, but before then, whenever we feel lost or the way ahead seems dark, the best solution is always to pause, quietly ask Him to light the way, and then wait for Him to do so.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> December**

A week or so ago I dug up out of the garden or removed from their baskets my begonia tubers so that I could overwinter them. I had done this with some success a few years back, but last year's attempt ended with decidedly mixed results, because, I think, I didn't keep them dry enough. So this time I had left them in a warm room to dry out and today I carefully teased off the soil still clinging to them. The tubers looked quite healthy, and I found it rather childishly exciting that, when cleaned of soil and dead root, they seem to shine with promise: a dried nugget that would produce many beautiful flowers in a few months' time. We have lived in an instant age for very many years; people expect instant credit, an instant choice of hundreds of TV programmes at the touch of a button, instant sexual gratification, instant meals, frequent instant health through medication. No doubt you can think of many more examples. We have forgotten the exciting anticipation which the virtue of waiting brings: childish, maybe, but ennobling.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> December**

I noticed a glow in the East through the window, so I rushed off for a walk to enjoy the rising sun breaking through the clouds and shining through the bare trees. It would stay low today. It struck me that I can enjoy the wind-down feeling of this season because I know that after the solstice the sun will rise higher beckoning summer. We can similarly enjoy the wind-down feeling towards the end of our lives if we know that we ourselves will rise again, making death simply a winter solstice. On my walk I reflected why I myself believe in the resurrection, and I came up with: 1. The historical evidence for the resurrection of Jesus is good. 2. I have known of and been with people who clearly see beyond death as it approaches and sometimes heard them speak of it. 3. It is a logical consequence of belief in a

loving God; otherwise life is a pointless lottery. 4. I sometimes have a profound and moving sense that heaven is next to me, so that if I lived in its dimension I could simply reach out and take hold of it.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> December**

My early morning walks recently turned into damp, dark slithers along slippery pavements and roads and it's been too wet and muddy to get in the fields. So I paused them in favour of striding out after breakfast with the sun well risen. So this morning while still in the village I was seeing the Christmas garden decorations differently. The illuminated deer I was used to enjoying in the predawn darkness appeared as lifeless skeletons, and without lights, wires dangled from eaves in a futile gesture with all appearance of sparkling icicles vanished. Even decorations with pictures surrounded by lights were dull when unlit. It was because, of course, the decorations were intended to be lit up, to shine light on the world. This is what they are manufactured for. Human beings, I thought, are also made to shine, to spread light in the world. We light up the darkness for other people when we lend a helping hand, when we do our work well, say a kind word, give a gift, pepper our conversation with thankyou's rather than whinges, or just light up the world with a smile which is as easy as switching on a light.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> December**

Thinking about mistakes yesterday reminded me of helping to organise a church weekend. The venue held ninety but, with two months to go, bookings only filled a third. I started to pray publicly and specifically to completely fill it. The venue then told us they could release some places to another church to relieve our threatened financial loss, but our bookings treasurer worked out the amount we would lose on the whole venue without further bookings was small enough for us to decline the offer. Later the treasurer discovered a calculation error: the loss would actually be a significant, but by then it was too late for to cancel places. We continued to pray, and with a week to go we had the ninety places filled. Then two people dropped out through illness. Hopes for answered prayer seemed finally dashed. When we finally arrived for the weekend, a couple had turned up without realising the need to book. God had answered our specific prayer through two mistakes, the weekend was an important time spiritually, and an agnostic man was converted to faith and became a key church member. God, I find, delights to answer public, specific prayer, sometimes through mistakes.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> December**

Yesterday I set off for my early morning walk in the dark and didn't switch the light on when I put on my footwear. On returning I found I had a solid brown walking shoe on my right foot and a light blue soft trainer on my left. Another mistake a few days before had a jumper washed too hot, so a colour ran. This seemed disappointing until it dried, revealing an improvement in its appearance. We worry about mistakes especially if we are perfectionists, forgetting that God is like the superior Eastern carpet designers who can create, from a mistake made by the weavers, a design even better than the original. So always offer your mistakes to God, even the serious ones. Most mistakes, I find, don't really matter, and the only true mistakes are the ones we don't learn from.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 7<sup>th</sup> December**

I heard recently that we don't get enough of the sunlight vitamin D in Winter. With a sunny day forecast I planned to get outside. But I was at church and doing chores in the morning, and delayed by a reluctance to get out of my chair after lunch (anyone know the feeling?) Then the first essential gardening job was in full shade. Then I found a shrub needing a prune., I cut off longish stems and then positioned a garden waste receptacle where I could stand with the sun on my face while cutting them into smaller pieces for the compost bin. I don't suppose I got much vitamin D, but there will be plenty of other days when I can. I believe in making prayer a priority, and like getting into the sunlight, there are plenty of days when I can do that. But sometimes, essential jobs, people's needs, and feeling off or weary can get in the way. But like my short time in the sun today, there are still always moments we can grab to be with the Lord, however brief, sometimes an arrow prayer or just remembering Him with us, and they are very precious.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> December**

I walked this morning when it was light but not yet sunrise. Looking up, I was seeing a whole variety of colours: so many shades of greys in dark and light clouds, with creams and buffs towards the East. Where the sky was clear, I saw a whole variety of light, mid and slate blues, with hints of pink, mauve, and purple towards the East at sunrise time. It's easy to take for granted the ability of our eyes to distinguish colour. Apparently it varies from person to person, with the average estimated at being able to see around a million shades, and even people with a colour blind problem seeing around 10,000. No wonder we feel inexpressible delight when looking at stunning natural world vistas. These visual feasts are one of God's greatest gifts to us; bringing natural healing to our times of unease. It reminds me how important it is each day to take time to see, with our eyes certainly, but also with our heart, so that we see beyond the grinning face, aggressive words or grimace of the person in front of us, to the wounded soul beneath who need to see God's love in us.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> December**

Yesterday I walked alongside two or three local drains which had been well cleared of vegetation: cleared grasses, reeds and mud lay along their banks, and it was heartening to see the water flowing so freely so the drains could do their job properly. There is good evidence that drains and rivers when properly cleared can often reduce flooding. Of course, we need grasses and reeds and other vegetation to grow to sustain wildlife. What has to be cleared out of our drains is generally good material, unlike the plastic rubbish that is strewn across our nearby beaches, which kind volunteers often clear away for us. Our lives are like the drains and rivers. They will only work properly if we clear away the things that clog them up. Like beach rubbish sometimes those things are harmful and destructive habits that we need God to clean out for us. But often, like the reeds, they can be good activities that we need to move on from, to create space for what God really wants us to focus on at this moment. Advent is a good time to reflect on this.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> December**

A couple of weeks ago I told you I had met a farmer on a walk who told me how bad this year's harvest had been because of weather conditions, including excessive rain last Autumn, and his fears for a repeat with this Autumn turning so wet. To encourage him I told him I would ask all my contacts to pray for a spell of drying weather: wind and no rain. I don't know whether you prayed or you noticed, but a day or two after that we had a dry and windy week. It certainly dried up my garden soil but I wondered if it had affected the fields. I had a long walk today and another farmer told me that week had made a difference and that the wet is not so bad this year as last. So thank you if you joined me in prayer. People often say that answered prayer is just coincidence. Archbishop William Temple's reply to this was simple: 'When I pray, coincidences happen, and when I don't, they don't.' I prayed before setting off to meet the right people. The farmer was one and later I met a friend I could pray with.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> December**

Changing the month on my calendar of bird photos for the last time, I was delighted to find that the bird for December was one of my favourites: the nuthatch. A striking bird, with its blue grey back, buff underparts and broad eye stripe, it seems almost magical the way it can run down a tree trunk head first. When I lived near the Peak District, I knew of two places I could guarantee to see one. There a cafe where if you arrived early for lunch, you could find a table by a large window, outside of which was fixed a large bird table with feeders, a long way up from the ground. Among the variety of tits and other birds that crowded on it, a local nuthatch would always arrive sooner or later. Not too far away on a riverbank on a walk I often did, there was a colony of them in a group of trees where you could nearly always see one or two. The world would be so much poorer without birds; without the nuthatch; and also without you, whoever you are; because you are a unique individual loved by God.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> December**

I took advantage of the sunny weather to get an hour on the garden this morning. I hadn't been out enough recently. But I then had some indoor jobs to do and by the time I was clear to get out again the damp and cold had returned to make it very uninviting. Then I remembered that I hadn't finished that most routine of Autumn jobs: clearing leaves. I felt much better for an hour of sweeping and raking, which had kept me warm. It's easy to regard steady routine jobs as boring burdensome chores, but as long as they aren't detrimental to us, they may be more precious than we realise. They can be all important wind-down times. We don't have to think or worry much about what we're doing (or maybe our rambling thoughts while we undertake them will solve a problem or give us ideas), or we can pray when we think of people. They are also a simple way of finding satisfaction: what can be more satisfying than a draining board of washed dishes, a cleaned window, or a lawn swept of leaves?

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> December**

I am sitting in my study looking out at the winter jasmine I planted a few years ago. I recently made a change, moving my desk to where I can see this delightful plant when I sit at it. I am so appreciating its bright, simple, cheerful yellow flowers on this blustery, wet, damp day. Sometimes when we feel bleak or get in a rut, only a small change is needed. Take a walk, phone a friend, look at pictures or photos, write a poem or a prayer, draw a picture, sing a song or hymn, walk round the block, or just count your blessings, (include the water in your tap, the clothes on your back). An elderly man I knew got down, did less and less, till he was physically and mentally in a bad way. Then he resolved never to let a day go by without going outside, even if only into the garden. It made all the difference. Often it doesn't take much to lift ourselves from feeling sorry for ourselves to being thankful and content. But we might have to make a small effort in order to see the beauty of life, like moving a desk.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Monday 30<sup>th</sup> November**

Today is the feast of St Andrew, a fisherman by trade and one of the Twelve Apostles. He was first a disciple of John the Baptist where he met Jesus. After spending part of a day with him he hurriedly found his brother. 'We have found the Messiah', he said to him, and took him to Jesus and Peter then became leader of the church. When Jesus fed 5,000 with five loaves and two fish, it was Andrew who had won the confidence of a boy sufficiently for him to share his packed lunch. When some foreigners, Greeks, came looking for Jesus, the disciples called on Andrew to make the introduction. Andrew seems to have been just outside the inner circle around Jesus of Peter, James and John, and yet in some ways he was the most important, winning people's confidence and introducing them to Jesus. An old friend rang me out of the blue today who was like Andrew. He would look for newcomers in the church, make them feel welcome, and befriend them. If you have this gift, please use it, because the churches need it. If you don't have it, why not practise it anyway?

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> November**

Today is the beginning of the Church's Year: Advent Sunday. Here at the very beginning of the year the four traditional Advent themes are the on last things: Death, Judgement, Heaven, Hell. At one time the church's sermons on the four Sundays of Advent would be on each of those themes. My experience is that whenever a church follows that pattern nowadays, it is much appreciated. The Christmas season begins on Christmas Eve and ends on Epiphany Eve, 5th January, and the rejoicing over the birth of Christ our saviour is meant to be limited to that period, with carol services and celebrations held then. Advent was intended as a solemn preparation for the Christmas Festival, a time for self-examination and penitence similar the preparatory period of Lent before Easter. The focus of Advent is not the first, but the Second Coming of Christ, the all-important message that we will all have to stand before him as our judge: a very good reason for delaying the tinsel and feasting and getting serious. Using Christmas, as we do, to push that preparation aside is equivalent to celebrating Easter throughout Lent. May you have a solemn and blessed Advent.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> November**

Out walking recently I stopped to watch a cat approach a dog. The cat crept warily, tail held high and making itself look bigger than it was, but it looked clearly interested in making the dog's acquaintance. The dog, on a lead, watched it carefully, as if worried, and backed off, whereupon the cat walked away. I once house sat for a dog and cat. The dog would follow the cat around the house, and try to get near and stand next to it, or even over it, but in a friendly manner. The cat, which was highly independent, would ignore the dog, then move away, and do everything to put the dog off. Finally, exasperated, the cat's claws came out and its paw delivered a side swipe to the dog's nose much to its astonishment and discomfort. Befriending withdrawn or hurt or aggressive people can be an important calling, but is a delicate operation requiring the persistence of my house sat dog combined with care not to invade another's space clumsily that I witnessed in the cat the other day.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Friday 27<sup>th</sup> November**

Walking round my village the other day, I noticed two substantial garden gnomes standing guard over a front door, but past their glory. They needed a lick of paint. I felt rather sad that gnomes have gone out of fashion. In line with the national trend, the only other garden ornaments I have found in my village so far have been animals: rabbits, ducks, pigs, and hens, including some pushing wheelbarrows; children including a little boy having a wee, nudes, and today a lit-up deer for Christmas. Apparently gnomes were introduced into the UK in 1847 from Germany, a country steeped in the folklore of gnomes, trolls, fairies and other forest folk, who offered late night assistance in gardens and the protection of property. Like Marmite, people either love or hate them, and from 2006 the Royal Horticulture Society banished such 'brightly coloured creatures' from the Chelsea Flower Show, as being associated with the tasteless, tacky, and unsophisticated. All this reminds me to pray for God's protection of property and for plants to flourish, and also to root any snobbery out of my thoughts and attitude. And I confess I like those little red hatted creatures!

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> November**

Yesterday morning about half an hour before sunrise the whole Eastern half of the sky was suffused with brilliant yet gentle pale orange at the horizon shading to pale yellow higher up. Then there were some dark streaks of cloud beautifully highlighted by the dawning light. Above me the sky was dark blue shading lighter over to the Western Horizon. I was so entranced I felt desperate to see the sunrise, so I extended my walk another mile or so to avoid getting home too early. I wasn't disappointed. I couldn't take my eyes off the changing colours all around me, which shifted to clouds all round being coloured pink and then those in the East tinted with deep red gold. The sun rose glinting bright gold through slithers of cloud as I neared home, feeling that I had already been filled to overflowing with enough experiences of God's love to last the whole day. The sky in our country is one of the Creator's greatest gifts to us. It changes not just every day, but every second, and we can admire it wherever we are.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 25<sup>th</sup> November**

Today the church remembers Isaac Watts (1674 to 1748). He is known as the Godfather of English Hymnody. Although hymns were already being sung in churches, Isaac Watts pioneered two important new changes. Till then, hymns were based only on Psalms from the Bible. Watts introduced new poetry for hymns based on Christian experience. He used Psalms as well, but introduced New Testament themes, so that these hymns also were specifically Christian. He was a capable man, a nonconformist minister who wrote books on logic as well as 750 hymns, three of his most well-known being 'Joy to the World', 'O God, Our Help in Ages Past', and for me one of the greatest hymns of all time: 'When I Survey the Wondrous Cross'. Isaac Watts had made up verses from a very young age. What a stupendous gift to the church he has himself been because he used his gift for God's glory. What gift can we use for God today?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> November**

Several years ago a medical researcher working on healthy food for prostate cancer patients told me they had discovered that the healthiest food on the planet was rhubarb crumble. Not just rhubarb on its own (originally imported from Russia as a medicinal herb), but the whole crumble meal: the real deal. A few years back I found a recipe I like (with dates, spelt flour and lots of oats), and occasionally make it. Today I decided to do so but my rhubarb plant being finished for the winter, I had to retrieve some I had frozen. Domestic freezers are a wonderful invention which have revolutionised our lives. It is especially enjoyable, and arguably a healthier use of them, to freeze something we have grown ourselves. But I heard the story of a man visiting Africa who was amazed when a neighbour invited the whole family to dinner because they were cooking something that had been caught (I can't remember what) and would have too much to eat. The man reflected that freezers had contributed to an independent lifestyle that can undermine community. The Bible simply says, 'Practise Hospitality.' We each have to work out what that means for us.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> November**

I went a fair distance walking today, mostly on a beach battling a headwind, so I enjoyed listening to the pounding of the waves and the susurrant of the surf folding its lace on the shore for a couple of hours or so. There is something hypnotic about the sound. It makes me constantly aware of the sea and yet takes me to a far away place at the same time, I think because I become aware that the surf has broken on the sea shore for aeons of time, before people appeared on the planet, before vegetation even. It seems as though it has always been there, and more than that, we know that if human beings disappeared from the planet, the waves and the tides and the sea shore would go on, as they are now. It gives us a sense of the eternal, and reminds us that behind the eternal is God, the one who brings all into being, who watches over us, and knows us by name. It speaks of the assurance of God himself.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> November**

Yesterday I quoted the great Advent hymn of hope 'Come thou long expected Jesus' containing the line 'Born a child and yet a King' which links to the Festival we celebrate

today: Christ the King. This is one of my favourite Sundays of the year. I never stop marvelling at the breath-taking audacity of what we believe: that God is sovereign and yet chose to be born as a tiny baby in poverty, and to die in utter weakness on a cross. Ironically, to get back at the chief priests who manipulated him into crucifying an innocent man, Pilate insisted that the charge board above Jesus' head read 'King of the Jews', making a joke of it. Yet the joke rebounded: a thief crucified with Jesus saw through the pain and weakness of the cross to the truth: 'Jesus remember me when you come into your kingdom.' A God who is King could force us to believe by terrifying us, or by continual supernatural signs, but we would not love such a god. But you can love the baby in the manger and the man on the cross, especially when you know he is there by choice especially for you.  
Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 21<sup>st</sup> November**

I rarely write poems, but recently the time of year reminded me of one I wrote about twenty years ago while out walking. It points to the most powerful source of hope the world has ever seen, and we all need hope from time to time.

#### *November*

November mood upon me,  
I take a country stroll  
To lift my sinking spirits,  
And clear my doleful soul

November mists surround me,  
I walk along the track,  
The drizzle wet upon my beard,  
The chill wind in my back

November leaves lie fallen,  
Squalid on the ground,  
Disintegrating yellowed dull,  
Faded limes and browned

November trees stand sodden,  
Limbs grief-stained, gaunt and stark  
The lichen glowing ghostly green,  
A stain across the bark

November bracken rotting,  
Broken, bowing, slumped.  
Grasses slewed and lifeless,  
Sprawled in ugly clumps

November legs are aching,  
A pain across my chest,  
November knees cry 'Please oh please  
'Just sit and take a rest'

November mind remembers:  
The years so quickly sped  
The joys and the achievements  
The fears, the groans, the dread

November soul is seeking  
Beyond the dying earth  
The buds and new beginnings  
Of late December's birth

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 20<sup>th</sup> November**

Today is the feast of Edmund, a Saxon born in 841, brought up a Christian, by 865 King of the East Angles. He led his army against the Viking invasion of 869. Defeated, Edmund refused to deny his faith and share power with the pagan invaders, and so was martyred as an offering to their gods. He was buried at Bedricsworth (the modern Bury St Edmunds). King Athelstan founded a religious community to care for his shrine which became a place of pilgrimage. King Canute built a stone abbey, and for centuries Edmund's resting place was patronised by the kings of England as the cult grew, and St Edmund became the first Patron Saint of England, only taken over by George from the C13<sup>th</sup>. Many people would like Edmund, an Englishman, described as wise, humble, devout and godly, back as our Patron. It is worth visiting the ruins of the abbey and the nearby St Edmundsbury Cathedral, and also the Wilton Diptych in the National Gallery, Richard II's personal worship aid painted in about 1395, showing him kneeling before the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels. Richard is presented to her by Saints John the Baptist, Edward the Confessor, and St Edmund.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> November**

Today the church celebrates the feast of St Hilda (614 to 680). She entered the religious life aged 33, joining her sister as a nun at the Chelles monastery in France. She was soon recalled by St Aidan to become the Benedictine Abbess at Hartlepool. (I can recommend visiting St Hilda's church built nearby on the Headland.) In 657 she founded a double monastery at Whitby, for both men and women quartered separately. As Abbess, she hosted the famous Synod of Whitby in 663, called to decide the date of Easter, celebrated differently by the Roman and the Celtic church. She favoured the latter, but typical of a leader known for her gentle holiness and her graceful concern for others, she was gracious in giving way to the decision in favour of Roman way, which led to the Roman method of organisation and mission being adopted by the English church. Hilda developed learning in the monastery, building up libraries, teaching clerics Latin, and training five Bishops. Held in high regard by kings and rulers, she found time for all, including encouraging the cowherd Caedmon to produce vernacular poetry and song. Thank God for Hilda; pray for more like her.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Wednesday 18<sup>th</sup> November**

I recently dug out an old watercolour set and tried my hand, and have just finished my attempt at Moses at the burning bush, which I loved doing once I stopped trying to paint perfection and simply enjoyed myself. The story reminds us that when the Divine breaks through to be near to us, we need to stop everything, to be utterly still in the present, and look and listen, as Moses did. R.S. Thomas, the Welsh priest/poet, captured this brilliantly in his poem 'The Bright Field' which refers to Moses' bush and to two of Jesus' parables.

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. But that was the pearl  
of great price, the one field that had  
the treasure in it. I realize now  
that I must give all that I have  
to possess it. Life is not hurrying

on to a receding future, nor hankering after  
an imagined past. It is the turning  
aside like Moses to the miracle  
of the lit bush, to a brightness  
that seemed as transitory as your youth  
once, but is the eternity that awaits you.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> November**

Walking today I heard someone behind me calling a name repeatedly in a tone of desperation. I knew immediately that a dog was hurtling towards me at the speed of Lewis Hamilton. At one time, I would have turned round, but I have discovered that if I ignore the dog, it will ignore me. So nowadays, if I see a dog off the lead, I deliberately look to either side, anywhere except straight at the dog, only greeting the owner as I pass. This takes discipline, especially if it is racing towards me like a maddened bull heading for a matador. Since doing this, no dog has ever jumped up to mark my clothes with its signature paw print or crashed into me. My peripheral vision informs me that even those heading straight at me stop, look confused, and trot off. I like making a fuss of dogs, but not being pawed all over by them. Like dogs, many people need us to make cautious and gentle contact with them, not barging in, so that they can learn, over time, to trust us. Sometimes, people need us to look, in love, to the side of them, as it were.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 16<sup>th</sup> November**

I started the annual task of sweeping up leaves. I had grass clippings I could mix them with for the compost bin. The job was soon done because the high winds had blown most of them off the drive. But looking up, I noticed there are plenty still to fall. A few years back, in a fit of enthusiasm, I decided to make leaf mould in a big way. So I drove to the local churchyard, and filled the car boot with bags of fallen leaves, making more than one journey. I made

a proper wire cage for them next to my compost bins. I was determined to wait the recommended two years before using it, but I decided to move before the time was up! Tidying the garden before leaving, I looked at the nicely rotted leaves and hoped they would get used by someone else. It's a key part of life's journey to understand that some of the most important things we achieve are what we leave behind us. I don't simply mean material things, but what we have done that inspires, moves, uplifts, or blesses in any way. Perhaps for some people it's the most important thing.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> November**

Talking about praying for weather yesterday reminded me of George Müller, who built and ran orphanages in Bristol in Victorian times and lived by faith and prayer. He was crossing the Atlantic on the SS Sardinian in August 1877. The ship ran into thick fog. Müller explained that he needed to be in Quebec by the following afternoon, but Captain Joseph E. Dutton said he must slow the ship down for safety, so the appointment would be missed. Müller went to the chartroom to pray for fog to lift. The captain followed him, claiming it was a waste of time. After Müller prayed a very simple prayer, the captain started to pray, but Müller stopped him; because of the captain's unbelief, and because he believed the prayer already answered. 'Captain,' he said, 'I have known my Lord for more than fifty years and there is not one instance that I have failed to have an audience with the King. Get up, Captain, for you will find that the fog has gone.' When the two men went back to the bridge, the fog had lifted, and Müller kept his appointment. The captain became a Christian and became known as 'Holy Joe'.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 14<sup>th</sup> November**

I spent the day walking. I chatted to a farmer, who gave me good advice about a route, and then we talked about the disastrous year it's been for crops. I've heard the same from a number of farmers: last Autumn so sopping wet the young plants didn't put down deep roots, so couldn't get moisture in this year's dry spring; all followed by wet harvest time. It's easy to forget that this affects us all, not just farmers; wheat prices are already high. With the other economic challenges we face, as always the financially challenged could be most affected. Looking at the fields I walked past and through today, there is a lot of standing water in them. I hope we aren't in for the same problems this coming year. I promised the farmer today I would pray for a spell of the dry windy weather the land needs, and ask others to pray as well. I don't have a problem with praying for the weather, and believe I have seen answered prayers for it. I hope many of you will have the faith to join me, on your own, and, when it's allowed, in your church worship.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 13<sup>th</sup> November**

Talking about someone in their nineties yesterday reminded me of Bert, a tough nonagenarian Welshman I knew. He had come to faith in Christ in the First War trenches. Watching countless comrades on either side of him fall to the bullets made him ponder why he had survived. He found his answers in faith in Christ. He would attend midweek communion every week. Once when a blizzard was blowing, the old church door was blown

open with a crash and the gale hurled a flurry of snow into the church with Bert, coming up the steps on hands and knees. Congregation members half his age were sheltering indoors at home. Some time later he was ill, confined to his terraced house home. One evening, feeling better, he took a stroll up his beloved garden. He walked back into the house, looked at his wife sat on the settee, said, "I'm going to God," and promptly fell dead at her feet. I have known others too, living close to the Lord, who has told them when their time had come, so they could inform loved ones in a way that made it clear they would safe in His hands.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> November**

I woke up late again so nearly missed my early walk, but dragged myself out to it. I saw a local man I know in front of me. He is in his nineties, and I know was a hard-working man all his life. I caught him up and enquired after him and he seemed in the peak of health, partly because he still walks to get his paper every day. He told me he then often walks to the new local fresh fish shop to get his tea. I asked him how he cooked it and instantly I got a free cookery lesson. He inspired me to go to the shop myself later on, buy fish, and copy one of his methods. Excellent. I can cook reasonably well, and have wanted to try the shop for several weeks, but cooking fresh fish is a weak area, something I haven't done much, so I was grateful for the late waking and consequent advice. I long for the day when church people share their faith as easily as they might share a recipe. It happens in other countries, and I pray for the day when it will be the norm here.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> November**

I plan a busy day on the garden. Delay start to sit and research plant overwintering. Empty compost bin. Sit for coffee. Pray for busy people I know. Turn over compost in another bin. Think about moving plants. Pull up pea sticks instead. Lunch. Sit. Pray for busy NHS people. Prune a quarter of a climbing rose. Go indoors to put pruning casualty blooms in vase. Plant two plants. Walk round garden searching for secateurs. Pray for busy colleagues. Dig up shrub offshoot and plant elsewhere. Sit. Think about how to fill the gap I've created. Plant a self seeded shrub I dug up yesterday. Move neighbour's cat's poo off lawn. Make myself give thanks for cats. Pray for all neighbours. Dig round dead plum tree with hopes of digging up. Hard work. Dig up three bricks: good excuse to stop. Go indoors. Sit. Write this. Dig over pea plot. Clean tools. Mow lawn. Stop. Sit. Enjoy long cup of tea. I hope heaven is not the boring sounding 'At Rest'. Just pottering about in the angels' garden would be fine by me. But who knows? Our Creator God is full of inventive ideas and surprises.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> November**

Waking up late, I wondered whether to bother with my early walk. Then I realised I was late enough to see the sunrise, which is nowadays usually after I walk, so I set off. Not a chance: cloud and fog combined to create an impenetrable grey curtain in the sky. It struck me that 'greyness' summed up the morning. I thought that I was unlikely to see anything uplifting or exciting. Immediately I was proved wrong, by a simple sight. I passed a beech hedge, one I had not especially noticed before. Beech hedges are my favourite, and it caught my attention because the film of moisture laid on it by the mist made the leaves glisten. The autumn

colours were highlighted. They almost sparkled. So I did something simple: I stopped and looked. Some were all over that beautiful mid-brown they turn into. Some were still green; some tinged yellow, and in others the edges had turned brown, the centre portion yellow, and the veins were still green. When life seems all grey, which can happen especially in the morning and even in summer, sometimes doing simple straightforward tasks can help, or looking at simple things.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 9<sup>th</sup> November**

There were far fewer people attending that usual, and we couldn't sing or hear the moving notes of the Last Post and Reveille but I found this year's Remembrance at the village War Memorial just as powerful as always, and I noticed something new. Standing in silence for just two minutes, focussing on people I know of who lost their lives in war: my grandfather and others I've heard about, and being profoundly aware of the devastation and horror of war, and the death it brings - all this each year actually changes me, I believe, and others too. For surely it is not possible to be in that solemn place of remembrance and to dwell on those events, without my desire and determination to live in peace being increased. For we make a dreadful mistake if we think that peace is the responsibility of governments alone, and we dishonour the war dead if we remember them with any hatred, jealousy, or prejudice in our hearts. So today, am I truly at peace in my own heart, and with others in my home, my street, my place of work?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> November**

As a child on Remembrance Sunday, at the end of the service in church, the congregation would move into the churchyard and gather round the War Memorial. My father would stand with the other veterans, my brother with the choir, and I and my mother together. The names of those killed in the two World Wars were read out. My mother would be holding my hand. Her grip would tighten as her father's name was read, and I sensed the grief which had pervaded her family as she grew up. She once told me that during WWI, a village woman used to watch for the postman coming. One day she saw him and suspected it was a telegram. She followed him and realised he must have gone to my mother's house. So she went there and found my grandmother fainted on the floor with the telegram in her hand announcing that her husband was missing presumed killed. My mother, who was two years old, and her sister who was six, were standing there wondering what to do. Lamentations 1.12: 'Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> November**

Walking the other morning, a flock of geese flew overhead calling. I watched them for a while. They were drifting around, and changing from one V formation to two and then three. They looked as if they weren't sure where to land to feed. In my life, sometimes the way ahead has seemed clear; I have known exactly what I wanted to do, or what I believed God wanted me to do: what the tasks for the day were, or what and where the next stage of my life was going to be, like a single formation of geese heading like an arrow heading straight to a known destination. At other times I've been full of uncertainty, like the geese today

wandering and wondering where to land, my direction shrouded in mist. We may be feel a lot like that during our current circumstances. I think it is important that we don't worry about uncertainty. If we daily put ourselves in God's hands, sometimes the way will be clear and sometimes not. Sometimes we'll following his path and sometimes miss it. The really important thing is that we desire to follow His will.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 6<sup>th</sup> November**

Being entertained by neighbours' fireworks for the last few days has reminded me of my childhood when there were few public displays, and most people had a bonfire in the garden, complete with home-made Guy. I loved being taken to a shop by my Mum to choose individual fireworks. My favourite were Jumping Jacks, which fizzed and cracked and jumped around your feet. I used to tie one to my Dad's jacket, fondly imagining he didn't know, and he played his part by running around pretending to be scared by it chasing him. (Inevitably they've since been banned). In recent months I've been researching the gunpowder plot, potentially the greatest terrorist attack on our country. I'm ashamed that I didn't know until recently how appalling was the mistreatment of Catholics that propelled them into rebellion. They received crippling fines for refusing to attend protestant church worship, and were imprisoned for hiding priests come over from the continent to celebrate the Masses their spiritual life depended on, or attending themselves. At this time of year, as well as the fun, we should be penitent about church disunity, and make a special effort to befriend and pray for other denominations.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> November**

I didn't need the weather forecast or my barometer to tell me of the sudden increase in air pressure today. The whole feel of my pre-sunrise walk was different. The sky colour was glorious, shading from deep grey/blue in the West across to violet, and pink in the East, shifting to pale yellow and orange as the time of the sunrise approached. The air around me had a light, expectant air, awaiting the day. A clear moon was high up to the South West, approaching its third quarter. A kestrel was hunting over the fields to the East, hovering, then moving away, swerving in its search, hovering again, black against the sky, its wings a steady blur. Distant trees, almost empty of leaves, were stark against the horizon. I sang God's praises. To do anything else but thank Him for his gift of the morning would have seemed trivial, insulting even, yet how easy to forget. Maybe a good resolution would be: as soon as you take in a stunning scene, and before you take a photo of it, thank God for it!

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> November**

The beginning of my daily walk is often brightened by a small front garden on one of my regular routes. Some well-chosen colourful bedding plants surround a well-kept lawn. Today the last of this year's annuals had been removed leaving bare earth. Instead of disappointment this gave me a feeling of optimism, because the soil seemed to be waiting expectantly for new plants. Waiting is part of life. We may wait fearfully, as for the result of a medical test. Or anxiously for the decision of an interview panel or an exam mark. Or impatiently, for a traffic jam to clear or a bus to arrive. If we bring God into our waiting, we can wait

expectantly, optimistically. Even when Jesus had to wait for the soldiers to arrest him, and for Pilate to try him, he could endure this patiently because he had learnt to trust God. Like him, we can learn to wait expectantly, knowing that whatever happens God will come to us, as He came to open Christ's tomb on the Sunday morning. 'I waited patiently for the Lord; He turned and listened to me and drew me out of the miry pit.' (Psalm 40)

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 3<sup>rd</sup> November**

A patch of fungi suddenly appeared in my lawn: a disc a foot in diameter. Today I went out with a spade and removed it. It had a particular beauty: a clump of pleasantly shaped toadstools in shades of cream, buff, and brown. It was growing on a substantial tree root a few inches below the surface and connected to the stump of a long dead tree. Along the top of the root were the tell-tale white strands of mycelium the fungus was feeding on. If I put it in a plastic bag and left it for a day or two, it would probably give off the sweet aroma indicative of honey fungus. This had pervaded the garden and is the likely culprit for the death of a number of shrubs. You can't get rid of honey fungus. I have come to terms with it. So when I plant a shrub, Sometimes I choose one unlikely to be affected by the fungus, but sometimes one that often is, knowing that I may only be able to enjoy it for a short time. Contentment comes when we accept that nothing lasts for ever. Except, of course, God's love for us.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 2<sup>nd</sup> November**

Today is All Souls Day, when the church commemorates the faithful departed. It has not been part of my tradition very much, but as I get to the time of life when we naturally call the past to mind more often, I find myself thinking more of those whose lives touched mine but have since died. As I do so two feelings come to the fore: firstly I regret not telling them more, if at all, about the ways they blessed me, even (or perhaps especially) those who hurt me in some way. Secondly, I see them more as people with fears and failings, with sins and struggles, as well as with the achievements, confidences and contentment that was on the surface when I knew them. All this will help me today if I think of any of them, firstly to forgive them if I need to, secondly to feel compassion for them, a compassion which will increase the gratitude I owe to them, and thirdly to renew my determination never again to neglect to show appreciation, encouragement and gratitude at every feasible moment to any fellow traveller through this life, from the bin man to my nearest and dearest.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Sunday 1<sup>st</sup> November**

All Saints used to be a great Christian celebration. It originated in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, when a festival to remember Christian martyrs was expanded to include all people redeemed by Christ. Originally in May, it was moved to today to counteract the dark aspects of the druidic festival of the dead, Samhain, which included sacrifice and fortune telling and was driven by dark fear of the future. It was the precursor of Halloween. All Saints was intended to be the opposite: a Christ centred festival of light and hope. Some churches brilliantly continue to use it as an antidote to Halloween by putting on joyful, fun events like 'Light Parties'. All Saints invites us to remember and celebrate the ordinary saints we know and have known. I think of four ordinary people: my mother and father, and two church members I knew. They all got

things wrong at times, had many ups and downs both large and small, and many fears. But they always trusted Christ and He brought them safely through it all to the eternal life he promised. I can think of hundreds more for whom the same is true. Now what could give me greater hope than their experiences?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing,

### **Saturday 31<sup>st</sup> October**

There are animals in a paddock near my home, including two fallow deer. I spent a while looking at them today. They looked at me too, curious but alert for threat; one nearly ran off when I scratched my head. I love to watch them run so delicately, or walk in such a careful, almost mincing manner, or graze peacefully. Their stillness is infectious. Just watching them can brush all my cares aside. It reminded me of my need to seek stillness before God. I sometimes do this by sitting with my back straight and both feet on the floor, so I don't lounge. To focus and still my mind I may say a mantra to myself like 'Be still and know that I am God,' or the words of Jesus, 'Come apart and rest a while,' or concentrate on my breathing, imagining that as I breathe in, I am breathing in the love of God, and as I breathe out I am breathing out into God's love all my negative thoughts and feelings. It's worth trying this and persevering. Then you may find that like the deer, you are in stillness, but alert to the movement of God.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 30<sup>th</sup> October**

Tempted by a bargain, I recently bought some dahlia tubers in a sale, but when I planted them I realised they weren't such a bargain as it would probably be too late in the season for them to flower. They got to the bud stage and I feared that was it, but a few have bloomed. They seem particularly special for having made it. They may not be spectacular, but the small patch of pink, cream, white and yellow is brightening the darkening late October season. I've just been out in the rain to enjoy them! I'm glad I gave them a chance instead of writing them off. It's so sad when we write off older people. They may not always show spectacular memory or energy, but be patient, stop by, give them time and listen. Their life experience, their inner memories, their quiet strength will blossom and colour your dark days. And if you are older yourself, never fear being written off, because your God never will, and any time you can chat to Him about the old times, and the new, just as if He's your friend sat next to you, which deep down, you know He is.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 29<sup>th</sup> October**

I met a young woman with two dogs on leads and a pushing a small pram. 'Wow,' I said, 'two dogs and a baby out for a walk before seven in the morning!' It was uplifting, seeing someone taking life by the scruff of the neck: life affirming: an antidote to the negative attitude one can come across, as in people who when you say, 'What a lovely day!' reply 'We'll pay for it.' Over the last two years I've met three people who turned their life around with a renewed positive attitude. Walking on the local rail trail, it took me ages to catch an older man up (unusual for me). He told me he'd been warned by a doctor that his weight and lifestyle were killing him. He had reversed this by rigorous exercise. Another of a similar age I met on a bike miles from anywhere in a place so windy I wouldn't dream of cycling there.

He had reversed diabetes and bad health. A jogger had lost many stone through determined diet and exercise. It all depends on attitude, and faith can be the key. 'Be transformed,' says the Bible, 'by the renewing of your mind.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> October**

I have been getting up at the same time as before the clocks went back, so on my early morning walks I am suddenly seeing blue skies instead of black, and the pre-sunrise reds and oranges of a few weeks ago. This morning a blackbird sang to me as I set off. It felt like spring all over again, and prompted me to sing hymns as I walked. I am privileged in being able to set my own timetable at present, but I still find that keeping a regular rhythm for the day and week is helpful and natural. All this reminds me of the worship song:

Teach me to dance to the beat of Your heart,  
Teach me to move in the power of your Spirit,.....  
You wrote the rhythm of life,  
created heaven and earth;  
In You is joy without measure.  
Like a child in Your sight,  
I dance to see Your delight,  
For I was made for Your pleasure.....  
Let all my movements express  
A heart that loves to say 'yes',  
A will that leaps to obey You.  
Let all my energy blaze  
To see the joy in Your face;  
Let my whole being praise You

(Check it online if you don't know it)

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 27<sup>th</sup> October**

Putting the clocks back reminded me of when, several years back, Sheffield City Council automated all their public clocks. So our hundred and fifty year old church clock had a computerised, automatic winding mechanism and timing device fitted. An extra weight was added to the pendulum which was raised if the clock was slow and lowered it if it was too fast. When the clocks went back, an arm would stop the pendulum for an hour and then kick start it, and stop it for twenty-three hours when the clocks went forward. Until then the clock was faithfully wound by a church member who lived over the road. When at home he checked its time every hour and nipped across to adjust it if it was only half a minute out, a real labour of love. At first the automatisisation was a disaster; our clock, which had kept faithful time for years, was always wrong, But once the teething troubles were sorted out, it worked like a dream, a perfect marriage of old and new technology working together. Likewise, things work perfectly when elderly people and young people respect, encourage, and learn from each other. Are you doing that?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 26<sup>th</sup> October**

Today the church remembers Alfred the Great, King of the West Saxons who lived from 849 to 899. Well known is the unlikely legend that he burnt the cakes of a woman hiding him; less so is his strong Christian faith. Alfred ruled at a time when pagan Vikings were in control of much of England and threatening to take over the country, pushing Christianity out. Alfred fought hard battles against them and won against the odds. After his victory, he pardoned the Danish chieftain Guthrum on condition that he and thirty of his knights convert to Christianity. He then persuaded Guthrum to stay and rule with him, uniting the country of England. Alfred was a scholar, and believed that the Viking invasions were the result of people turning away from faith. He believed this could be rectified by learning, so he encouraged learning across the country, promoted the Christian faith, and made laws based on the Ten Commandments. He is the only English King to have been given the title 'Great'. If you want to honour him, learn your faith, commend it to others, practise holiness, and pray for your government to follow God's ways.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> October**

Today is Bible Sunday, when the church celebrates the gift of the Bible, the foundation document of our faith, containing the words and life of Jesus Christ and much more. The Bible never ceases to amaze me. It is a collection of sixtysix different pieces of writing: history, prophecy, poetry, letters, gospels, law. They were written over a period of at least 800 years from about 700BC or earlier to AD100. It covers a period of time from the bronze age to Roman civilisation. Yet the Bible is not an ancient book. When I open it and read it, I can be instantly refreshed, comforted, challenged, inspired, enlightened, guided, as if it had been written yesterday. Anyone can do the same. Reading a bit of the bible everyday can be life changing. Much of the Bible is easy to understand without any interpretation, but it can help to read it with notes that explain the background situation, or show why some parts sound strange to our ears. You can easily get booklets of these notes to guide you. Just ask your local church. But the most important thing is to open it, pray for understanding, and read it.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Saturday 24<sup>th</sup> October**

I have sometimes been walking round my village in the dark of the early morning at about the time that people are rising, so it's interesting to see the number of lights being switched on one by one as I walk, behind closed curtains and blinds. It gives me a profound sense of the constant turning of the world; there are always people to the West of us about to do what we have just done: wake, rise, eat, work, sleep, etc. It reminds me that our wonderful world is always active, always alive, and that we are part of a huge human family of almost unimaginative variety. We sometimes speak of the world being shrunk by ease of travel, by television, the internet, modern communication, so that we know more about the world than any of our forebears ever did. Yet loneliness is on the increase. Can we be so busy observing the world that we neglect the neighbour next door, or the acquaintance at the end of a phone? I might be interested in how many people are showing lights in the early morning. Better I am interested enough to keep in touch with the people I know.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 23<sup>rd</sup> October**

The reason I went to Sheffield the other day was for a follow up appointment at the dental hospital to check on treatment I had had a year or so ago. (It was fine.) We were facing a journey that would potentially take us through two different city rush hours, but with a request from the hospital (because of Covid), to arrive as near to exactly on time as possible, but without parking available. So setting off early we prayed not only for safety but to arrive on time. At the first service station we had made time well enough to stop for coffee, but this went on longer than expected. So when setting off again I was relieved that the Satnav indicated that I should arrive just in time for the appointment. But we soon took a wrong turn, we had to correct. When we drew up outside the hospital exactly on time it occurred to me that without the wrong turn we would have been too early. I long ago learnt that God is interested in the details of our lives, and will answer our prayers for them, frequently I find, through allowing us to make mistakes.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> October**

Walking round my village in the dark at present, I notice things differently to when my eyes are bombarded with objects I see in the light. Today I noticed the obvious fact that people are drawn to settlements, i.e., to dwellings next to each other. A few years ago, on Orkney, we saw the five thousand year old stone age village of Scara Brae, and I was struck by its similarity with my village today: people choosing to live in close proximity for security and convenience, sometimes, but not always, linked by kinship. We might hope that people will also choose to do so for friendship and human fellowship, and good neighbourliness is often the result, though sometimes, sadly, hostility breaks out instead. Social mobility and car ownership certainly mean that people are less likely to know their neighbours and the people of their settlement than once was the case. I am glad though, that I currently live in an area where even strangers routinely greet each other and often pass the time of day. How about you? Are you a good neighbour? Are you friendly to people in your settlement? Would you like to do more? Could you?

Stay safe,

Every blessing,

### **Wednesday 21<sup>st</sup> October**

I had to be in Sheffield and with some spare time I looked round one of the museums with an excellent display about the history of Sheffield, including Punch and Judy figures owned by 'Professor de Lyle'. He invented his name from a golden syrup tin, and entertained countless children and adults with the show in parks and other places in the city. So there was a hideous looking Mr Punch, a Judy, policeman, baby, a figure I wasn't sure of, and the hangman complete with noose and coffin. No doubt there were other well-known figures missing from the collection. Punch and Judy shows have been going for over 450 years in the UK, albeit nowadays with less violence and frequently the omission of the hangman. They are an important part of our culture and the familiar slapstick humour, too absurd to be taken seriously, nonetheless provides the serious lesson that in the end we pay the price for living a self-centred life without concern or care for what we do to others. The great Christian hope is that at any time of our life we can repent, be forgiven and ask for strength to live better.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Tuesday 20<sup>th</sup> October**

I recently went to an animal blessing service. It was beautiful: a blessing of pets, some heartfelt thanksgivings to God for all animals: pets, farm animals, wildlife, and prayers that we might live in harmony with them. The leader said that St Francis, who loved animals so much, once preached to birds, and most of us talk to our pets, and some of us to birds. I didn't like to interrupt, but I wanted to own up to speaking to two worms a few days ago. I found them wriggling on a country lane and was worried that the sun would dry them up before they reached the grass verge. So I moved them. The first time I met someone who moved worms, I thought it was silly, but now I think it is a natural thing to do, but if I ever had a cat again, I don't think I could go as far as a lady I saw who sat on the floor because her cat had occupied her armchair. We have to live with animals in ways that work for us and them, remembering above all to respect them as God fellow creatures with us.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Monday 19<sup>th</sup> October**

I woke early. That meant I would have time for my early walk before I had to go out for the day. But I would be walking in the dark for the first time this Autumn. This suddenly seemed uninviting, I think because during the lockdown I have learnt to be more observant, looking look more intently around me. So walking in the dark seemed pointless, empty. But I got up anyway and got myself outside. I loved it. There was plenty to see: stars and planets, the sharp delineation of the hedges and trees against the sky, the lights from the towns on the horizon illuminating the clouds. But best was the feeling of security: the darkness seemed to wrap itself around me like a blanket. For me, the empty and the dark times in my life can become a blessing. I think it happens when I realise that God is in those times, as in every time. Then I can let the dark times wrap themselves around me, because God is in the wrapping. I know the time will come when He stirs my heart to fulness again, but for now, let things be. All is well.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> October**

I passed a garden with a striking pink cosmos flower. I thought about pink being the colour of compassion: a problem for those who see pink and compassion alike as 'girly', the opposite of the qualities they honour: such as being hard, tough, macho, uncompromising. I want to direct those people to Jesus. For most of his life he was a working man, a builder in wood, and probably stone, and he refused to compromise even when he knew it would lead to crucifixion. But as well as his manliness, Jesus demonstrated great compassion. St Luke, whose feast day is today, brings out Jesus' compassion more than any other writer, telling us how his 'guts were wrenched' when he saw suffering people, how he cared for the underdog and the poor, and stood up for the rights of women. As a doctor, Luke must have been compassionate himself, and he was also tough; in days when travel was dangerous he didn't shrink from joining Paul as an assistant on his missionary journeys, and no doubt he gathered material there for the valuable record of Jesus' life and the early church that he left behind for us. Strength, compassion: partner qualities.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Saturday 17<sup>th</sup> October**

Today I walked past a sign outside a shop that read, 'Cars Bikes Number Plates'. At first I wondered if I had to get my pushbike registered. Then I realised it referred to motorbikes, or the 'Number Plates' had nothing to do with the 'Bikes', and I was taken straight to a memory just over fifty years old. I had just arrived in Iran as a volunteer at a church boys' school. It was five miles out of the city, so I and my fellow volunteer were given cycles, but we had to have them registered and number plates attached. We were told, 'Mary will sort this for you.' Mary had trekked out overland to Iran in the 1920s and founded a church girls' school which she still ran. Having lived in the country for 50 years she had recently been granted Iranian citizenship. She knew and loved its people and she knew and loved the Lord she faithfully served. You won't find her through Google, but Mary was a saint, one of the most remarkable people I have ever met. Needless to say, she went through the daunting bureaucratic machinery of registering cycles in Iran like a dose of salts.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Friday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

If you rise before sunrise at present, your eye, like mine, may be drawn to the brightest of the heavenly bodies: Venus, the Morning Star. Over the last few days I have been recalling the uplifting words of the Venerable Bede in his commentary on the Book of Revelation written about 710: 'Christ is the Morning Star who when the night of this world is past brings to his saints the promise of the light of life and opens everlasting day.' Bede was writing within a century of the founding of the Lindisfarne monastery, so the light of Christ was growing in the North. Yet they were dark days. We may feel the same about our world today, and we might sometimes wonder if the darkness could overwhelm the light. Bede knew that could never happen. Like the Morning Star, the light of Christ will always shine, however dark our world. So always look up, in the sky or in your hearts, and pray with Charles Wesley:

'Christ, whose glory fills the skies,  
Christ, the true, the only light,  
Sun of Righteousness, arise,  
Triumph o'er the shades of night.  
Dayspring, from on high be near;  
Daystar in my heart appear.'

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

A man once shared with me a painful family problem. He wasn't a churchgoer, but when I offered to pray for him he readily agreed. At the end of the prayer he said something like, 'What's this amazing feeling that's come over me? I've never felt like this before.' I told him he was feeling the love and peace of God. St Teresa of Avila, whose feast day is today, would have well understood, because she was a 16th Spanish mystic who described feeling the love, joy, and peace of God with great intensity. Teresa was not just someone who experienced spiritual feelings, though. She was a nun who spent hours in contemplative prayer, but also worked hard to found a new Carmelite Order leading monks and nuns into a more serious devotion to their calling. Despite opposition, she reformed the Carmelites, and left behind the legacy of highly influential spiritual writings. In her prayer book, after her death, was found this powerful and prayerful prescription for anxiety, known as the Prayer of

St Teresa:

Let nothing disturb you  
Let nothing frighten you  
All things pass  
God never changes  
Whoever has God lacks nothing  
God alone suffices

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

I had to force myself to get up. I had woken early, and knew my walk would be in the dark, which felt extremely uninviting. My determination, however, was immediately rewarded: my porch light gave our firethorn red berries and green leaves stunning intensity, my eye was immediately caught by a beautiful crescent moon, and a lone bird sang me a tuneful song. Feeling a nudge to turn West, there was Mars ahead, at its brightest at the moment, being opposite the sun. (Look for its red tint late evening). Turning South I kept watching the planet, but then noticed that below the moon, Venus the Morning Star was bright in the East. With the Earth sandwiched between its neighbours, their visibility gave me a very real and thrilling sense of being alive in our vast solar system with its apparently lifeless vast planets. This sense can make us feel small, vulnerable and mortal, wondering what life is about. Or we can praise God that even in the midst of the enormity of space, He made, knows, and eternally loves each one of us, giving us all the significance and meaning we will ever need, which is what I did!

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

Nearing home quite early today, yet more sparrows started their noisy greeting in a garden behind a wall. I wondered if they were waking up the home owner. It reminded me of living in a house together with four other students. We were required to be at the local church for 7.30pm each morning. In the discussion before we moved in about sharing out responsibilities, I mentioned my normal time of rising and was immediately given the task of waking everyone else up with a cup of tea. In the first room I would just quietly place the tea on a chest of drawers. My friend would already be up, dressed, and kneeling at his bed in prayer. In the second room my arrival would be greeted with agonised groaning. I would find the third room, occupied by the remaining two, in total, silent darkness. Each of us seems to be by nature either an owl or lark. In this, as with every part of life, we need to learn where our strength lies and play to it, respect those who are different, and help those whose lives demand a timetable out of kilter with their natural body clocks.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 12<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

A skein of geese, thirteen in number, flew over me on my morning walk. Later, at church a knowledgeable gentleman told me that the geese roost on the estuary and then fly into the fields to feed, where I have seen them on other occasions. They were in their classic V formation and I noticed them changing position. We love to hear and see geese flying

overhead. I wonder if it is because we sense that they have something important to teach us. The V formation is a model of cooperation. It improves the uplift for most of the birds and makes flying easier, so that they travel further, and they regularly swap position so that those at the front and the tips get relief. If only human beings could cooperate as well, life would be easier. But when we lead, we want to boss people around and we don't always give way easily. We should learn from geese. The leader is a servant to the others, making their lives easier, and giving way. As always, Jesus put it perfectly: Luke 22.26: 'The greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 11<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

Following my Thought about the rail trail, a couple of people shared with me their happy memories of when the line was open. As child I loved to go on holiday by steam train, or to cycle to one of the many local lines to watch them. Many years ago I used to take breaks at a friend's holiday cottage near Oxenhope, where the preserved Keighley and Worth Valley Railway still runs. We would often catch a train to Keighley, enjoy the local park, and then walk back along the valley, seeing at least one train steam past. It was pure nostalgia, taking us back to the era of village church evensong, open coal fires, Raleigh bikes with three speed Sturmey Archer gears, and beautiful patterns made by the frost on the inside of your pre-central heating bedroom windows. It's so important to remember experiences that gave us pleasure. So I don't think there's anything wrong with nostalgia, as long as it doesn't creep into wearing the rose tinted spectacles that think the past was better in every way. The wise person learns the valuable lessons of the past while embracing the beneficial advances of the present. Do You?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

I walked today on our local rail trail, and found myself imagining the the line in operation, the passengers watching the pleasant rural landscape through the same trees and bushes that now line the walking and cycling path. I thought of commuters travelling at the end of the day back to one of the villages dotted along the track, reading a newspaper or chatting to fellow traveller. I thought of the excitement of holidaymakers headed for the seaside on a day trip or an annual week's holiday. I passed the old level crossing keeper's cottage at a road. I thought of the responsibility of that job, and the pride the staff must have taken in carefully opening and closing the gates at the right moment, and checking on their safety. Many modern gates are operated electronically and automatically. Personnel monitor them and they are reckoned to be extremely safe. But could you love and take a pride in what you see on a screen in the same way as something you operate manually several times a day? Nowadays brainwork and computers dominate us, It's even more important to use our hands usefully or creatively: an essential part of being human.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 9<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

After days of disappointment when the weather forecast's promise of early morning rain failed to materialise, at last I have just experienced one of the delights of life: walking and singing praise to God in the rain! It's mystery to me why some British people are so

miserable about weather (except for flood victims and farmers with too much or too little rain). The variety of weather is one of the rewards of living in our temperate island home with refreshing rain, reviving wind, languid sun, foggy woods and much more: a kaleidoscope of different experiences. Yet so many people run like scared rabbits at the first spot of drizzle. So I set off very happily this morning with my usual double waterproofing: overtrousers, waterproof top, freshly dubbed boots, and underneath it all: skin. Dressing properly allows me to enjoy any weather to the full. But there is a more significant sort of clothing. The Bible says we should ‘clothe ourselves with compassion, kindness, meekness, and patience,’ and put on an ‘apron of humility’. I have learnt to be happy in any weather, but real, deep, lasting joy comes only when I clothe myself with those holy qualities of character.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

I recently walked past a barn attractively covered with Virginia creeper, a visual splash of reds, greens, rusts, and combinations of them. It’s a favourite with many people, so I was surprised to find that certain varieties are classed as invasive species, because they can swamp plants and bushes, so you are supposed to keep it under control and not let roam outside your garden. I generally dislike invasive species, from grey squirrels and Canada geese to Spanish bluebells and foreign ladybirds, and it is difficult prevent these from harming British wildlife, whereas I would really miss the brilliant flaming red Virginia creeper. Many years back, I tried growing some on my house. I planted it on a corner, the worst possible spot, because the wind kept blowing it down. I tried propping it up and training it, but all to no avail. A few years later, after I had moved, I returned to the house and found that by itself it had grown vigorously a long way up the wall! So I learn two lessons from this plant: to control myself from too easily invading other people’s space, and (yet again!) to be patient; so many problems fix themselves.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

The word that comes to mind to describe my view of the morning so far is gentle. Walking round the field, the breeze was so gentle as to be imperceptible; the standing water was gently seeping away; the sky was a gentle mauve haze; and even when the rising sun tinged the clouds, it was a gentle gold. I passed a garden full of beautifully manicured evergreen shrubs, in different shades of green: that gentlest of colours. Later looking out at my garden, I sensed it gently quietening down to rest. One of my favourite Bible verses is Ephesians 4.2: ‘Be always humble, gentle, patient,’ where those gentle virtues of humility and patience are linked together with gentleness. I’m reminded of a favourite prayer:

Jesus, Son of the Virgin pure,  
guide me through this life.  
May your love be in all my thoughts,  
your likeness is in my face.  
For love of you,  
may my heart warm to others who are warm hearted to me,  
and to those who are not.  
Be with me always, by day, by night,  
by night by day.

It's an ancient Gaelic prayer, so gently beautiful, gently challenging and gently powerful.  
Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

In preparation for today's Thought, I took my two favourite bibles and held them and said a prayer of thanks. We easily forget how fortunate we are to have a Bible to read in our own language without anyone arresting us. You would be liable to arrest in much of the Soviet Union in the last century. Until the 16th century you would not find a Bible in English. William Tyndale devoted his life to changing that. He translated the New Testament from the original Greek and part of the Old from the Hebrew. But astonishingly his life was threatened. The Bishops and King Henry were afraid of Tyndale's support for the Reformation. Like the Soviet government, they knew that the Bible is a revolutionary book that confronts totalitarian power. He fled to Europe and his New Testament was published in 1525, and then part of the Old. His translation influenced English versions for centuries. Before he could complete the task he was betrayed and executed at Brussels in 1536. Today the church commemorates Tyndale. If you have a Bible, hold it today; give thanks for it, for your freedom to read it, and for William Tyndale.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 5<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

I enjoyed my early morning walk the other day until my peace was shattered by the noise and rush of the commuter traffic streaming along the main road I had to cross to my house. (Rush hour starts before 7am here.) Suddenly, after the tranquillity of nature, machinery of any sort seemed disgustingly unnatural. I felt disrupted, angry even at the shattering of the natural world by machines. A day or two later, on a longer trek, I had to walk for a while by the side of a B road, where here in the countryside cars are driving at 60mph to cover the long distances. This can feel very threatening to pedestrians. Whenever I do this in these parts, however, and this day was no exception, the unpleasant feel of the traffic was soon lifted by the respect of nearly all the drivers, who gave me a wide berth, some slowing considerably, making me feel safe. Machines, including cars, are a blessing, reducing workload, making life easier and more exciting. How well we are able to live cheek by jowl with them depends on those who operate them, driving carefully, for instance, or respecting their neighbours' peace.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing,

### **Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October 2020**

The other day I walked past a field of potatoes, their stalks dried to leafless grey antlers above the neat brown rows, proclaiming harvest time. I longed for a fork to dig, because there is something exciting about unearthing the treasure of shiny cream new potatoes, appearing like magic from the soil. The potato is a simple, humble vegetable, but has enormous nutritional value, giving you much that your body requires, although you need other foods as well. It is cheap and easy to grow, so by the early nineteenth century, the poor Irish labouring classes lived almost entirely on potatoes, but that reliance spelled disaster in the potato blight and famine of the 1840s. It plunged the South and West of Ireland into starvation, which sadly the British government did little to alleviate, resulting in a million

deaths and a million emigrations. Today is the feast of St. Francis, who taught us to love God, to treasure nature, to live simply and humbly, and to care for the sick and the poor.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2020**

Setting off for my morning walk I saw two beautiful sights. To the left, half of the Eastern sky was splashed with pre-sunrise oranges and pinks. To the right a deep yellow full harvest moon hung low above the Western horizon. Its mountains and valleys stood out clearly without the need for binoculars. The moon was soon covered in cloud and disappeared from view, but it struck me that it was still having its beneficial effects on the earth. Later in the day I checked out whether I had remembered these correctly. Without the moon's gravitational pull, days would be impossibly short: six to twelve hours; nights would always be very dark; tides would only be a third as high, putting creatures at risk that rely on the tidal churning of oceanic material, with a possible knock-on extinction of other creatures; and worst of all, the tilt of the earth's axis could disappear or vary wildly, leading to no seasons or very wild seasons. There are many complex examples of our planet being finely tuned to accept human life. The moon is a simple example, so when I see it, I frequently thank God for it.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 2<sup>nd</sup> October 2020**

I decided to have a good ten-mile walk. The weather forecast was perfect: pleasant temperature, little wind. I carefully prepared my packed lunch: for me one of the delights of a day's walking. I thought about making a flask of chocolate but reluctantly abandoned the idea for the sake of keeping the weight down in my rucksack, so imagine my delight when half-way to the first village I remembered the shop sold coffee. An added bonus was the owner sharing helpful local information about a difficult footpath I was about to use, which on my previous attempt had been hard to negotiate. Village shops are a great gift to us; places of meeting, friendliness and information as well as having goods for sale a short walk away, with maybe a post office, too. But they are underused and many are being lost as a result. We should try to use our local shops, buses, and pubs when we can, and value them. I was sad to hear that the shop I used today is struggling. I promised to go on praying for it, as I often do: a crucial part of supporting local that anyone can do.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 1<sup>st</sup> October 2020**

I enjoy my garden and it's my gym. I've concentrated in my current garden on shrubs and perennials. It's not planned; I just see a plant I like and find a gap which seems roughly right. Sometimes plants are in the wrong place and sometimes there is a lot more colour than others. The result can look untidy and a bit messy, although there's always something in bloom. I feel challenged when I see beautiful gardens which are a blaze of carefully arranged bedding plants in a riot of colour. This morning, though, I passed a garden full of perennials and shrubs, and bits of it were untidy, and bits were crowded and there were gaps and clumps of largely faded flowers, but plenty of interest. I loved it. It was like my garden, because by nature I'm untidy and messy and have crowded bits to my life as well as gaps. Thank God He makes us all different. Some people are naturally Plotters and some 'Pantsters' (flying by the

seat of their pants). In different ways we each contribute something special to life. And we grow as people when we learn to live or work with the opposite.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I often walk a footpath at the side of field. It has just been ploughed. Next to the path I saw a couple of branching tree roots turned over by the plough, about five or six feet long, no doubt from one of the trees on the other side of the path. Bright creamy fawn in colour, stark against the deep brown soil, these unearthed roots looked unearthly. They shouldn't be there, of course, because they belong beneath the soil, a reminder to me that tree roots extend underground the same distance as the branches. I thought about how much of life depends on matter living and growing in secret, how important the secret parts are. At planting time, any good gardener will get phosphorus and potassium rich fertiliser into the soil, because these nutrients stimulate root growth. Although you can't see them, your plants need strong and healthy roots. Our bodies are the same. We feed our bodies the right food to keep us healthy. Most of our body parts are unseen, secret, and like roots, essential. Our souls are unseen, too, and essential. You feed your plants. You feed your body. How will you feed your soul today?

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 29<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Today is Michaelmas: the feast of St Michael and All Angels. In the Book of Revelation St Michael leads God's angelic army in overcoming the Devil and his angels. They throw them out of heaven to earth. There has been a revival of interest angels: a good thing as long as it leads people to the truth of Jesus and following him. Someone told me recently of a man appearing, giving help to him and his friend, but was then nowhere to be seen. An angel, he thought. I often hear similar stories. The great Christian healing ministry pioneer Agnes Sanford tells how her father-in-law, a priest, walked on his own through a lonely wood at night, followed by a man who hated him. On his deathbed the man confessed to his intention to kill the priest that night. 'Why didn't you?' asked the priest. 'How could I,' he replied, 'when I saw a strong man walking on either side of you?' It is so important to pray for God's protection and guidance for yourself and your loved ones. It is the antidote to worrying about them, and you or they may see an angel as a result.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 28<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I've been noticing acorns growing and saw one tree laden with them. I once paid a friend for something with oak saplings I had grown from acorns, instead of money. She wanted to grow some woodland. I met her about twenty years later and I was pleased to hear they were thriving. I left two of them in my own garden, plus a beautiful flowering larch tree I had grown from seed out of pines I gathered, which I was very proud of. When I was out walking a year or so back, I came across some rooting acorns and I currently have a dozen oak seedlings I grew from them. Oak trees provide nourishment for a hundred species as well as oxygen for the planet, so I feel I'm making a small contribution to the environment. Sowing acorns reminds me of an important truth that our individualistic society neglects. I will probably not be alive when those I gave my friend have grown into small trees regularly producing a good

crop of acorns, let alone those in my pot now. But my life should not be just about me, but about others beyond me, and beyond the present moment.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 27<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Feeling starved of art owing to the lockdown, I have just visited the local art gallery, all very safely socially distanced and controlled. It was intensely pleasant to stroll through the familiar galleries with very few people about, lingering over old favourites or paintings that caught my eye for the first time. I was sitting where I could see two of the most arresting paintings when I noticed two young men having a pointed conversation about one of them. I asked if they were art students. One of them is, and the other one is about to start university to study medicine. I had an enjoyable brief chat with them about the two paintings, and about people's approach to students and coronavirus. I thanked them for talking to me, expressed my sincere approval for the subjects they were studying, and for the commendable approach they were, as young people, taking to the restrictions, and I promised to pray for them. I was left with an impression of two immensely well mannered, capable, and sensible young men. With such people as that, there is huge hope for our future.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I have been admiring many trimmed hedges, a treat to see: privet, laurel, hawthorne, leylandii (sadly no beech). I noticed two dividing hedges where only one side had been cut. I once lived next door to an elderly widow. A privet hedge divided our front and back gardens. She still tended her front garden, but through frailty had left the back to grow wild after her husband's death, making it difficult for me to keep my side of the overgrown privet neat. So I offered to cut her side as well. On the first attempt, I felt like a jungle explorer, hacking through the undergrowth, even stumbling across an ancient rotted greenhouse beneath it, which, alarmingly, she still used. I felt sad seeing the remains of the life they had left behind, until I saw it differently: as heartwarming traces of what they had enjoyed creating together. We can spend too much time feeling sad about the past, both our mistakes and the things gone forever. We need to reclaim the joy instead, deliberately recalling moments of happiness and peace; remembering them in detail: the sights, colours, shapes, sounds, smells. It's an effective way to meditate and pray. Try it!

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I have just seen one of my best sun rises: streaks of grey and gold on a mauve backdrop, and the sun glowing gold as it peeped above the horizon. It reminded me of one of my favourite hymns: John Bell's brilliant 'Today I awake'.

'Today I awake and God is before me.  
At night, as I dreamt, God summoned the day;  
For God never sleeps but patterns the morning  
with slithers of gold or glory in grey.'

John Bell sees God as the creator of all mornings, the grey drizzly ones as well as the

coloured sunrise. For many people the morning is a grey time, the time they feel most downcast, some very badly so. Like morning weather, feelings vary and they come and go (even those that last a long time). John Bell reminds us that God is over all and Christ is walking with us each moment, even in dark times, so verse 2:

‘Today I arise and Christ is beside me.  
He walked through the dark to scatter new light’

The hymn ends with a powerful morning affirmation:

‘The Maker, the Son, the Spirit together  
they called me to life and call me their friend.’

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 24<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

On my walk on the day of the equinox, the rising sun was glowing orange, but not as strongly, it seemed, as in previous days: a warning foretaste of the shortening days and the weakness of the sun in the winter months. I wanted to shout at it, ‘So you’re leaving us!’ Then I realised I had my thinking the wrong way round; it is we, on the earth, who are leaving; we are moving away from the sun’s rays as we roll Northwards. The sun will remain faithfully shining in its accustomed place. When we find someone difficult, we can often be thinking, ‘If only he or she were different.’ We watch hopefully, and usually pointlessly, to see signs of change. But our thinking is the wrong way round. We should try saying to ourselves, ‘If only I were different! If only I behaved differently to that person, perhaps more patiently, more kindly, looking for the best.’ If we do so, we might well be surprised by the difference we start to see in the other. That difference will warm us like the sun does when it emerges from a cloud, even on a winter’s day.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2020**

The other morning I was met by a beautiful sight on my walk. A great swathe of mist was rising at ground level. It was just before the sun rose to burn it off, and the wind was not strong enough to blow it away. Looking across the fields, it seemed as if the trees, hedges and shrubs were growing out of a cloud. It was a mysterious unearthly sight which I was able to enjoy for a long time. A man walking his dog and I enjoyed chatting about our enjoyment of it. Of course there is a perfectly simple explanation of what we saw: the mist rising because of certain weather conditions, and the light and viewing levels making it look ethereal, out of this world. Science is valuable in describing underlying causes for what we see. But there is a dangerous trend towards scientism (the belief that there is no knowledge worth having except science). It creates an arid empty view of life that denies the spiritual, which is obvious to anyone who looks for it, and frequently experienced by them. Sometimes a simple sight like a bit of rising mist can remind us of it.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Tuesday 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2020**

The Autumn equinox is today at 2.30pm. In its roll Northwards, the earth is half-way between the summer and winter solstice and at the Equinox the sun's rays will be pointing directly at the equator, and night and day will be same length. Astronomically it is the start of Autumn, and I prefer this start date to that favoured by meteorologists: the beginning of September, although I have to remember that their dating is used by gardening books. I think September often feels summery; this year summer flowers have been blooming well through September which has been largely warm, whereas from tomorrow the temperature is forecast to drop drastically into Autumn temperatures. Does knowing this matter? For me, it does, because being interested in how the world works is part of being human, and when that interest is pursued it results in scientific discovery which can benefit us all, and that scientific discovery could never happen if we did not live in such a well ordered world, where predictions can be made about how things will behave, a world whose order speaks, or rather for me shouts, of a creation arranged by a higher intelligence.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 21<sup>st</sup> September 2020**

I was walking again recently as the sun was rising. Although the sky was clear, because it was quite foggy I was able to watch the low sun without being dazzled. It appeared as a plain pale yellow disc hanging in the sky. I thought of the creation story in Genesis. It is not until the fourth day of the seven of creation that, 'God said, "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years, let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."' In most ancient people's creation stories, the sun is an important god or goddess. The ancient Israelites would have none of this nonsense, so in Genesis there is only one God in complete control. He sticks the sun in the sky as a mere lamp for the earth, and a calendar to mark days and seasons. The creation story in Genesis dates from at least 2,500 years ago and represented astonishingly advanced thinking in its day. We ignore the wisdom of the Bible at our peril.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I passed a field of sunflowers on my morning walk. Many were still in bloom facing the rising sun. I stopped and looked at them for a while. It was a fetching sight, as if they were stood with all their attention focussed on the glowing sun which was illuminating them. We are not sunflowers; civilisation would fall apart if humans just stood looking at the sun, but it reminded me afresh how important those moments of stillness are for all of us. I thought of the important poem 'Leisure' by William Henry Davies:

What is this life if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

No time to stand beneath the boughs  
And stare as long as sheep or cows.

No time to see, when woods we pass,  
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass.

No time to see, in broad daylight,  
Streams full of stars, like skies at night.

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,  
And watch her feet, how they can dance.

No time to wait till her mouth can  
Enrich that smile her eyes began.

A poor life this if, full of care,  
We have no time to stand and stare.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I've been doing more heavy pruning. Cutting off branches of our laburnum tree, tangled and blocking light, I found the tell-tale brown disc of rot running through them, so the remaining trunk will soon die like two I had cut down. The shoots of the overgrown mock orange intertwined with it are brittle and feeble; I can only hope my drastic action will revive it. Otherwise there will soon be empty space I don't want. At least my clearance revealed four self-seeded laburnum saplings. But they are all in the wrong place, and only one looks young enough to transplant. They remind me of children, such a delight, but they often put themselves in the wrong place, and as they get older, they are harder to move them where we want them. I once learnt at a school's careers evening, though, that most young people finish up in a different career to the one anticipated by their parents. Whatever charge we have of children, the point comes where we let go of controlling them, and rather support them in finding out, under God, who and what they are meant to be. I shall try to move the sapling, though.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 18<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Recently I found that a beautifully marked garden spider had built a web across a corner outside where there is a barn door at right angles to a gate from front to back. Reluctantly I had to destroy the web for access. This happened twice more, so I captured the spider and carried it to another corner made by a permanently open gate next to a fence. The next day I found the spider had constructed a web between the support bars of the gate. I left it happily sat in the centre awaiting its prey. Robert Bruce's famous dictum: 'If at first you don't succeed, try, try, and try again' was inspired by his watching a spider in the cave where he had retreated in despair. Unlike my spider, though, Bruce's was not constructing a web in the wrong place. Mine could never succeed until I moved it. When our perseverance to succeed comes to nought because like my spider we keep making the same mistake, through misguided, or even stupid behaviour, the best friend is the one who 'speaks the truth in love,' saying, 'You're wrong', and gently but firmly moves us see the error of our ways.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Thursday 17<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Today is the feast day of a remarkable woman, Hildegard of Bingen, born in West Germany in 1098. She became a Benedictine nun at 15, and an abbess at 36. She founded a second convent at Bingen, and reformed other convents. She wrote commentaries on the Gospels, on Athenasius, and the Rule of Benedict. Hildegard was a visionary, an artist, and a gifted musician. She wrote down the content of her visions, which she illustrated in a manner that recalls the images of the C18 visionary William Blake, and composed beautiful, enthralling hymns and music. Her visions inspired her to reprove rulers by correspondence, including King Henry II, the Emperor, and the Pope. During her 80 years, she also wrote books about natural history including studies on the elements, plants, trees, minerals, fish, birds, quadrupeds, and reptiles, and on medicine including circulation, headaches, vapours, giddiness, frenzy, insanity, obsessions. She also wrote poems and a morality play. A woman ahead of her time, I wonder if her achievements were the result of her belief that ‘those who love God, open themselves to Him. They ask Him to enter their senses, their souls and their minds.’

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Wednesday 16<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

If I had a bucket list, near the top would be a visit to a cave tucked away on the southern shores of Dumfries and Galloway, near Whithorn, where St Ninian, whose feast day is today, would withdraw to pray. Ninian is said to have been born in 360, the son of a Pictish chieftain. Britain was still occupied by Rome, and Christianity was being established. After visiting Rome, Ninian returned to set up a monastery and church in 397, where the present Whithorn Priory ruin is situated. The Venerable Bede speaks of him building a ‘White House’, and ancient whitewashed stones and the remains of a monastic community have been found nearby. Ninian went on to evangelise the Picts. By then the Roman legions were leaving Britain and incoming pagans were driving Christianity to the margins. Ninian’s pioneering missionary movement was 160 years before Columba arrived at Iona and 238 years before Aidan at Lindisfarne. If I make it, I will not be the first to make the pilgrimage. Carved crosses dating from C8th were found in the cave, and crosses carved in the walls. Ninian and his like can bring inspiration that Britain really can be reconverted today.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Yesterday I mentioned my skydive. An appeal from the Church Mission Society asking for volunteers for a sponsored tandem skydive came through my door only a day or two after I had been wishing I had done a parachute jump in my life, so how could I not respond? At the skydive, the sense of being alive and part of creation was overwhelming, both in the 45 second free fall when you experience gravity as it really is: a huge force pulling you groundwards, in the 10 minute floating in the parachute basking in a new view of the world’s beauty, and in the thrill from the magnificent adrenalin rush when you land and want to shout like a three year old, ‘Again!’ I had talked to maybe 300 people in the course of getting sponsors. Only 9 said, ‘I would love to do that!’ Many feared I would be injured or killed. I found this mystifying, since at the time no-one had ever been killed doing a UK tandem skydive. I told people that the two most dangerous moments were the car journeys to and from the airfield. Facts combined with faith can drive out fear.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 14<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I recently enjoyed a meal outdoors at a cafe. A wasp arrived and flew around the food, looking to sample it. I was surprised by how little this bothered me. I mostly left it to its own devices. At one time I would have been flustered by it. I realised my calmness came from knowledge and a role model. I refreshed my knowledge of wasps recently, discovering their benefits and their needs. Each summer UK wasps capture an estimated 14 million kilograms of insects, including many farm and garden pests like caterpillars and greenfly. They get the sugar they need to survive from wasp larvae. By late August there are no more larvae, so they come round us looking for sugar. A few years ago I did a tandem skydive. On the way up a wasp was discovered in the plane, next to me. People were worried by it, except my instructor who calmed the fuss going on around him. Clearly a man who jumps out of planes with a twelve stone stranger strapped to his front has learnt to remain calm in all situations. He was my role model. Knowledge and role models can transform our attitude to anything. Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

The other morning I found a moth frantically beating its wings against a window pane. I opened the top window and tried to shepherd it gently towards it with my hands, but every time we reached the window frame below that, it could no longer see the light and so escaped my efforts. It could not trust the guidance of my hands as soon as sensed the lack of light. Somehow I managed it eventually and it flew away at top speed. When people have been badly hurt, it is very difficult to help them, because they have lost the ability to trust others. So the love we show them has to be constant despite frequent failure, despite their constantly rejecting it and continuing to behave in ways unhelpful to them or even damaging. We may begin to doubt our ability to help, just as I began to doubt my ability to help the moth. But we can pray that God will give us the patience to carry on, and the love that, as St Paul put it, 'never gives up.' After all, God never gives up on us, however much we lose trust and reject Him. Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I found a dog rose at the bottom of my garden and took the trouble to cultivate it. This year everywhere is dripping with bright berries of every description: rowan, cotoneaster, hawthorn, etc, and my rose has rewarded my efforts with a brilliant display of perfect orange red ovoid hips glistening against a deep green foliage background. In childhood my mother would feed me a teaspoon of rose hip syrup every morning in winter, assuring me it was 'full of goodness'. This was not long after WWII when the syrup had become a valuable standby for vitamin C in the face of shortage. This year I have thought about using my rose bush to make some, but at the moment the display is too beautiful for me to ruin. The answer, of course, will be to wait until the leaves grow dull and the hip colour fades, when instead of the beautiful sight they have given my eyes, they can give a different gift: beautiful nourishment to my body. There is an art in recognising which gifts we have to give at different times in our lives, using them, letting them go, and moving on to find the new. Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 11<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I recently visited a church with a stunning carved stone. It's the head of 600 year old cross, possibly even 700, a flat stone carved on one side with the crucifixion, and on the other the risen Christ seated in glory, holding up both hands, with palms facing the viewer and bearing the marks of the nails. These were known as a Janus Crosses because they faced in two directions. They were situated in churchyards on behalf of mourners who were too poor to afford a memorial for their loved ones. When you are in a churchyard with old grave monuments, it's worth remembering there are many more graves than are marked. I think when the poor went to the churchyard where this cross originally stood, to be close to their loved ones, they would have been comforted by this startling image of Jesus, his hands and his gaze saying, 'Look, I was wounded, too; I'm with you in your pain. And I'm risen in glory, still here for you. Always.' And often that's all we need, isn't it? To know he's there with us, however bad things are; to know he never forgets us; or our loved ones.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Passing a seaside car park I noticed a sign forbidding sleeping in vehicles. It took me back to when I was returning to the UK after travelling in Europe with student friends. I headed straight from the ferry to the seaside resort where my parents were spending the last day of their holiday. I didn't bother to get accommodation as I was used to kipping on friends floors, and on my travels I had spent nights in a field, on volcanic rock we mistook for a sandy beach, and on a boat deck, so I insisted I would be fine in their car for one night before driving home with them. Late that evening I wrapped myself in my trusty sleeping bag and curled up in the back of their Mini, parked on the street. After a while, the owner of their guest house rapped on the car window. Now that everyone had gone to bed so no-one would know, she insisted I sleep on their lounge sofa. I confess I was disappointed by the removal of the opportunity to prove I cope with rough situations, but accepting kindness can be as important as offering it. And I slept.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Driving off for the day, I groaned inwardly when just before a bend the brake lights of the car and van in front came on. I was already preparing myself to remain calm during yet another jam, but within seconds, rounding the bend, potential frustration turned to delight as we saw why the two vehicles in front had stopped. A pair of swans were coming to the latter stages of a dangerous procedure. They were shepherding their five cygnets across a busy dual carriageway, one parent at either end of the line of them, with a young Canada goose alongside. Ours was the last of the four carriageways they had to cross and we watched them complete the journey with the same sedate determination they had no doubt demonstrated on the rest of it. They were a model of four human virtues which we do well to practise: courage, care for their nearest and dearest, hospitality to the stranger (the goose), and dignity. It made me assess how well I am doing in practising each of them.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Tuesday 8<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I've been cutting down part of our large laburnum. A couple of years back the two central trunks died, though thankfully some outer sections and saplings survive and flower. I've been wedged in narrow spaces, balanced on a stepladder, and armed only with a handsaw. So removing the two intertwined twenty foot trunks and branches, with six inches diameter bases, has been tiring and needing great care. I did a small amount each day, and today I finished! I couldn't stop! I attacked a nearby climbing rose and a damson tree as well! It's easy to get carried away with saw, secateurs and loppers in your hands and finish up with enough prunings for a town bonfire. Especially enjoyable for me are the cutting away of dead twigs and branches, and the release of light. At one point today, when a branch fell, it was as if a light had been switched on to the flower bed beneath. For growth in or lives, we need to let the light shine on our deadness: ugly behaviour, the pointless actions, and then prune it away. For myself, I need the light of God, and God's hand on the secateurs, to achieve that.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 7<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

After seeing the hay bales yesterday, I went for a cliff top walk. There was a strong west wind so I had to find a spot that was sheltered enough for my picnic lunch, well back from the edge. Although I could still see the sea, I was surrounded by browned and dying thistles. You might think this an unattractive setting for lunch, but I found it relaxing because like the hay bales, it signalled Autumn. We often welcome the evening time after we've had a busy day, when we can wind down and relax with friends and family or enjoying our own company. So in Autumn nature is coming to the end of its cycle of busy growth and production. In Spring and Summer it worked hard to beautify our world and feed its creatures. Now it is slowing down and becoming still. If we are wise we learn from it and give priority to our sabbaths, ensuring we always have space in the day and days off however busy we are. Otherwise, we are so stressed and worn out we become neither capable nor pleasant. Jesus himself regularly followed his own teaching to 'come apart and rest awhile.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Today I saw a field full of those cylindrical straw balls with a machine with a spike moving them. I love to see that scene at this time of year. I think the look of a field full of them is attractive in itself and it takes me back to happy times in childhood. I grew up in the middle of the country where a lot of cereal crops were grown. There was a field at the bottom of our garden which nearly always had straw bales in late summer, except they were rectangular and used to be left stacked in groups of four or five on end wigwam shaped. One of my fondest memories of summer evenings was for us to play hide and seek in them. It was almost impossible to guess where someone had hidden in a field full of them, and if you were 'on' and were clever, you could run from one to another when the searchers weren't looking that way and get back round to where they had already looked. Ah the simple pleasures are often the best! It was healthy exercise for us as well.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

Since moving to live in the middle of arable farmland, one of my favourite sights is a newly ploughed field, and I've just been experiencing the pleasure of walking round one. We often talk about the miracle of birth or the miracle of the universe, but I think we should speak more of, and appreciate more, the miracle of soil. It really is the stuff of life: full of the nutrients that will grow the food that enlivens us, the trees that oxygenate our world, the flora that beautifies it. It anchors plants and can revive itself through the decayed matter it receives back into itself. The soil I saw today was a deep rich dark brown, and where the clods had been flattened against the ploughshare and turned over they shone in the morning light. The Latin is 'humus' where our word 'humility' comes from, which we use for those irreplaceable self-effacing people who are just there for us, quietly sustaining us in the background, supporting and enlivening us and beautifying our lives, whom we so often forget to thank, or even to appreciate. Is there someone like that you need to thank today?

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2020**

I have been enjoying a peaceful afternoon in a calming village churchyard: lush green grass, a view over the rich soil of a ploughed field, wind turbines turning gracefully on the horizon. A country scene to make you feel all is well. This particular church was built in 1957 to replace a Victorian building destroyed in August 1941 by a German bomber. It's believed that the pilot was being chased from the city and wanted to get rid of his last bomb as he approached the coast. Thankfully no-one was killed or injured by the bomb, but the contrast between the peaceful afternoon and the remembrance of war reminded me that there is always pain in the world, and that it can come out of the blue for any of us and wipe away our sense of well being and challenge our faith. Yet so often I have found when listening to people with faith who are suffering, they tell me that beneath it all is a sense of peace: God's gift, I believe, and somehow, somewhere, and at some stage, peace does follow pain. If you are suffering today, may God bless you and give you hope.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2020**

I went for an early morning walk and as I walked I had a wonderful view of the sun rising above the horizon and was able to watch it throughout the hour it took me to arrive home. Seeing this stunning pure yellow orb blazing out living light and heat, it was easy to understand why ancient peoples worshipped it as a god, realising that life depended on it. The astronomers say there are billions of suns in the universe, a tiny proportion of which we glimpse when we look at a star filled sky. Thinking about this made me feel very small. I was just one of billions of living creatures being warmed on our planet today: a tiny speck in the vastness of space. Feeling small helps to eclipse any sense of conceit or superiority we may have. But we must never write ourselves off as insignificant. We have astonishing gifts: we can sing song, write a poem, cook a meal, make someone's day with a smile and so much more, and whenever we use our gifts to bless others, the world is warmed a little more.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2020**

Yesterday, I sat and simply looked at the scene outside. The light was just beginning to fade and it struck me how relaxing it was. I instantly felt extremely peaceful and I basked in it for quite a while. I was musing why this should be. It helped that after a blustery few days there was almost no wind and the stillness was calming in itself. Then there were the colours.

Perfect: the pale blue evening sky interlaced with occasional pink shades, and gentle streaks of white and grey clouds. Below were the various hues of green in my garden; the lawn appeared especially verdant, despite the approaching dusk. A thought struck me and today I checked it out and found I was right. According to the website I saw, I had been looking at five of the seven colours regarded as the most relaxing: blue, green, pink, white, and grey, and I realised that these colours dominate in the natural world. So the Creator knew what he was about; and wants us to be relaxed. So taking regular times for stillness, prayer, meditation, and just looking, helps us to be in the state that is intended for us.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> September 2020**

I've lived much of my life near the coast or on a hill, both with a breeze on the hottest day. I tell people it shows God loves me because He knows I don't like heat. The flip side is sometimes putting up with unseasonably cold weather, as in the cool conditions at the moment. I'm reminded of a hilltop church I was involved with which we modernised, making it comfortable and functional for the C21st. We thought it would be an excellent venue for retreats so we arranged one for clergy to attract them into bringing their congregations. It backfired badly: It was so cold for July they asked me to put the heat on! Then there was a long-recessed window, original, from the new ground floor loo into the open balcony above, and the builders hadn't finished the work to block out the sound, so when some poor unfortunate was taken short: oh dear! At least they had a laugh! Years later, though, a group that organised annual week-long shoestring retreats used the church one year, and were so impressed that they then came annually. Hold onto your visions, however long they take to bear fruit.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

## **Monday 31<sup>st</sup> August 2020**

Today is the feast day of Aidan, the founder abbot of the Lindisfarne monastery in the 7th century. As I told you on 10th June, Aidan insisted on walking everywhere so he could be with people on their level and share his faith. Later in life, King Oswin gave Aidan a fine horse with a jewelled saddle and bridle so he could travel more easily. Aidan rode away with unease; he was so far above people and couldn't speak with them. So when a beggar came up and asked for alms, Aidan gave him the horse, which he could sell. Hearing about it, Oswin was angry, and reproached Aidan, telling him he could have given him an ordinary horse good enough for a beggar. Aidan replied 'O king, is the foal of a mare more dear to you than the Son of God?' Oswald thought about it, and realised the Saint meant that even a beggar was God's son, and that to come to the assistance of people in need was to help our Lord himself, so he knelt at Aidan's feet, begging his forgiveness. So often, the saints call us to a life of humility caring for the poor.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

When I told you yesterday about God loving each one of us, and about my not being able to take my eyes off my new granddaughter, it reminded me of a story told me by a remarkable man who served God as a Church Army evangelist: Edmund Wilbourne. Edmund was ill as a child and it was not a brief illness because the local vicar called to see him. The vicar noticed that Edmund's parents had put a framed text in his bedroom, hanging over his bed, which read, 'Lord, Thou seeest me.' Looking at the text, the vicar asked Edmund, 'What do you think that means?' Edmund replied in a downcast voice, 'It means God sees what I'm doing when I'm naughty,' which may of course have been the parents' intention. The vicar, blessed man that he was, had other ideas. 'Oh no!', he said, 'It doesn't mean that at all! It means God loves you so much he can't take his eyes off you!' I guess the Vicar's wise words may have been one of the catalysts to Edmund's faith and Christian service. And it's true: God loves YOU so much He can't take his eyes off you!

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today I saw a new baby. She is a lovely child and very beautiful and she is my newest grandchild, and like all grandparents I just had to wax lyrical to you over her! It's a commonplace to say that birth is a miracle. Today it struck me afresh how true that is. I couldn't take my eyes off her. A few days ago she was not there; then suddenly there is a new person in the world. It is not just a new life, which is miraculous enough by itself, but a person, an individual. She has never been here before in the history of the world, and she will never be repeated again, and when we understand that each individual person, whoever they are, is made in the image of God and is unconditionally loved by God, then we see that each individual person is uniquely special, and this is what really makes each new baby a miracle. When we see the truth of this, then we may realise afresh how much God loves us and how special we are to him.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 28<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

I've just attended a hospital outpatients' clinic (nothing to worry about). As always, I was impressed by the efficiency and courtesy of all the people working there. We are all aware of the pressure the NHS is under; we hear a lot about underfunding, and we sometimes have long waits both for and during appointments. On top of this, we are naturally concerned for our own health, especially when we are not 100% fit. So it's easy to forget that the people treating us: doctors, nurses, ancillary workers, are particularly vulnerable to the pressures facing our health services, and may be especially tired, or frustrated by difficulties that day, and yet they still try to be their best for a clinic full of patients. So I've developed the habit of thanking medical practitioners for working for the NHS whenever I visit a surgery or clinic. I did it today to those checking me out, and to the cleaner I passed on the stairs as I left.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today the church remembers Monica, mother of St Augustine of Hippo, the great theologian who has been a huge influence on Western Christian thought for centuries. Monica was born

in North Africa in 332AD. She suffered much from her bad-tempered husband, and from mother-in-law who lived with them, but she won them over to faith by her patience. She had three children, the eldest, Augustine, causing her much pain through his dissolute life. She once threw him out of the house, but the local priest persuaded her to take him back. Eventually she gave up arguing with him and instead turned to prayers, fasts, and vigils. She followed him to Milan and continued her patient support of him there. All this led to his conversion both to a moral way of life, to Christian faith, and to commitment to Christian service. She died aged 55 saying that she wanted no more, now that she had the joy of seeing her son turn to God. By remembering her today, the church proclaims that great does not equal famous, and the famous are often reliant on someone else to be 'the wind beneath their wings'.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

I'd bought some pansies, so to plant them I started to empty the next compost bin due to be ready. It was all well rotted except for some twigs and the compostable bags we were using a year or so ago. I tossed them into the current bin to give them another year or two. When it's time to use that one, I expect to find the twigs largely disappeared; and the bags? Well I hope they're not looking worthy of being cleaned up for my shopping. Recycling has always been important to me; I was saving yoghurt pots in the 70s. I grew up part of the post war generation where you had to be careful, and you mended what you could, so I've always seen having a variety of types of glue as essential. I remember as a child eating off a great aunt's riveted plate. This was all before the invention of plastic of course, which would be wonderful if it wasn't polluting everywhere, clogging up our rivers, oceans and fish. So thank God for our excellent local council recycling provision, for scientists working on making plastic more recyclable, and for glue.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 25<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

A few years ago, I went shopping for summer trousers. I'm obviously too fussy, the wrong age or the wrong shape, because I was getting nowhere until I tried a charity shop and found three pairs suitable, two of which I bought. One pair was high quality cream linen and I wore them for best for a long time until they were downgraded to walking and pottering about wear. They were helpfully cool in hot weather. I knew I was taking a risk in gardening in them today, but all was well till I pruned a climbing rose and they snagged on a thorn worthy of being used as a whale hook. I despaired of the four-inch L-shaped tear until I realised I could be sitting on a gold mine. Surely a pair of retro trousers with a knee tear should fetch a tidy sum on eBay! Why jeans looking old and worn at the knee are attractive and in fashion is a mystery to me. But writing this, I realise I never asked anyone wearing them. I had better put that right, because prejudice is fuelled by our not bothering to understand.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 24<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today I saw a woman take a photograph of a broken-down building in a field. It looked like an old farm outbuilding. A friend said, 'She used to live there.' I laughed, thinking this was a good joke. Then to my embarrassment I discovered it was true and on closer inspection I

could see it was the remains of a house with the roof gone and much of the structure crumbled to piles of bricks. The lady explained that someone else had lived there after them, and then it was allowed to go to rack and ruin. Its attraction was its downside: quiet and peaceful, but isolated and cut off. I felt sad for the house: a family's refuge of comfort and shelter. But even sadder are people who fail to move on when the time is right: young people staying at home when it's time to fly the nest, people ignoring an opportunity to try for a new career that could expand them and use their gifts, people spending their free time pottering aimlessly when they could learn a new skill or do some worthwhile activity. It's possible to be too comfortable for our own good, isn't it?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> August 2020**

I had planned my day with perfect timing. I would end my break away with some leisurely reading in the morning, then some leisurely tidying and packing, leisurely lunch, leisurely drive home mid afternoon, arriving in plenty of time to complete the jobs I had at home in leisurely fashion. All went like clockwork until half an hour from home when the brake lights in front were going on and I sat in city traffic jam for an hour and a half. There's a saying: 'If you want to make God laugh, tell Him your plans.' I used to easily get worked up by any kind of hold up, grinding my teeth at the waste of time, but I've learnt to relax instead. Today I enjoyed the radio. Sometimes I find it a good time to pray. When I relax instead of getting upset, more often than not I notice a purpose in it. Often I realise that the delay has allowed me to meet someone I could share something important with or learn from. That didn't happen today, but because I relaxed in the car I felt relaxed at home, and I got my jobs done, including writing this!

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2020**

I took a risk wearing new boots for the first time on my walk yesterday. They were perfect for four miles, but then started pinching at the start of the only non-green part of the walk: three quarters of a mile of narrow path close to very busy road where stopping would have been extremely unpleasant. By the end of it my feet were screaming at me louder than the traffic. Arriving at the destination park I found a bench, took off the boots and let out the long loud long sigh of relief that my feet would have if they could speak. It's a good thing they can't; otherwise I would have endured a verbal roasting for putting on new boots for a ten-mile walk. I eased off the laces, which I had to repeat once more on the return journey, but it did the trick. It got me thinking about the times that easing off has been life changing for me; easing off expecting perfectionism in myself or others (while still encouraging the best), easing off worrying about the future or regretting the past. It's about being kind to myself, I suppose, including my feet.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 21<sup>st</sup> August 2020**

Staying in the busy suburb of a large city, I was delighted to find a 7 mile green trail running through it, with two large parks, one near the beginning and the other at the end, with extensive tracts of woodland in between. During the early part of the national lockdown, I hope that the closure of parks helped people to be more appreciative of this facility,

especially as green spaces and views became so important. Those with gardens, or even just a balcony, fared better psychologically than people without. The parks I saw today were created in the twentieth century from donated land, but many of our urban parks were the brainchild of the Victorians, who were concerned to provide open space for the poor, and it is a legacy for which we should be truly grateful. The Victorians get a lot of stick for some of their ways of life, but many of their leading lights were champions of social concern. This evening as I write, my legs healthily aching after the walk, I find myself giving thanks for the parks they made, and challenged to wonder what social concern I need to show in the coming days.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 20<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

More about the river I saw yesterday: I had been soothed by it for several minutes, and wondering why slow, lazy rivers give us feelings of peace and security, an assurance that all is well with the world. The water would all end in the sea, and the river cease to exist, perhaps a reminder that my life is moving steadily towards its end but that is how it is meant to be, and all is well. Some faiths believe that at death we merge into eternity, and that is their ideal, but the Christian faith believes in the resurrection of the body. I wondered how that could possibly happen and then remembered a talk by one of our top scientists, a brilliant man, who said he believed that after death God remembered us, so could recreate us as we were, but with a transformed resurrection body. I wondered at what age God would remember me, and decided that after death I would like to have the body of youth, the mind of maturity, and the heart of childhood: full of wonder and gratitude, willing to run with open arms towards another person, and take time to watch a river.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 19<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Spending a few days away, I took advantage of being near a friend to arrange a visit, and borrowing an OS map I had worked out an interesting walk I could do afterwards. But after spending a fascinating couple of hours with my friend, I was tired and finding my way to the walk seemed too much effort, so I set my SatNav to take me back to where I was staying. But after a few streets I had to give in to the nagging feeling that I ought to try the walk. So I drove to the start and as soon as I set off I felt rejuvenated and almost immediately a series of stunning rewards: clump after clump of an intricate, arresting wild flower I later discovered to be Pink Indian Balsam; a squirrel running across my path; bushes of refreshing blackberries; and finally a footbridge over a lazy river issuing oodles of peace. I thought my conscience was badgering me to make the effort to walk for fitness sake, but rather I was being given a gift of the love and peace of God and His creation. Often the case, I find.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Suddenly everything is brighter, and all due to the torrential rain we've had. I noticed the awoken intensity of colour in my garden flowers straight away; it was really uplifting to see. All the greenery in the gardens is fresher, as well as the colour, especially in a front garden I've just seen filled with every colour and variety of dahlia imaginable. Do you know the old story of the vicar walking round his parish and stopping to talk to Fred, busy in his garden as usual? 'I look at your garden,' says the vicar, 'and I think how wonderful God's creation is.'

The old man stops and ponders for a moment before replying: 'True vicar, but you should have seen the mess God made of this garden when He had it on His own.' Not just in gardens, but in every activity in this world, beauty, growth and success will be created when like Fred we work in harmony with God. He gives us the raw materials; our task is to work with them to manage and care for the world. Where do you need to work in partnership with the Creator today?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 17<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

I was looking round a churchyard and drawn to look closer at an expansive, beautiful walnut tree, the fruit green and inviting, (though I later discovered that when ripe it's hard to beat the squirrels to it). Looking more carefully I discovered a huge split dividing the trunk into two forks, running almost to the ground. It seemed miraculous that it is still flourishing and laden with so many nuts. Splits and blemishes like this can be profoundly optimistic symbols for us. We may have many blemishes: a streak of laziness, a bad temper, an addictive personality; we may have an ugly black split at our centre: a severed relationship, a criminal record, a unyielding depressive nature, but by the grace of God we can still bear fruit, if only we acknowledge our failings, and look to God for strength. Over the years, I have discovered that the best way to cope with the blemishes and splits in myself, is to ask God to bring me to the place of healing at the right time and place, and then to get on with producing what fruit I can.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 16<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

On a morning walk my eye was caught by the colour of a crop of barley. Even though it was a dull day it seemed like shining gold. A visual treat that made me understand why the alchemists of old attempted to manufacture gold, a feat that proved impossible for them but which has been achieved by modern day nuclear scientists. That technical knowledge remains unused, though, because despite the high price of gold it costs more to manufacture than it is worth. My mind wanders on to one of the many proverbs taught me by my mother: 'All that glitters is not gold.' We may be dazzled by a towering mansion, fine clothes, a string of letters after a name, momentous beauty, high office, but for my companion give me someone who will stop to see a golden field, watch the sunset, feed the hungry, tend the children, seek wisdom and kneel before their God.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 15<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today is the feast of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Mary was not at all part of the church tradition that nurtured my faith for more than the first half of my life. I have, however, come to see that we should regard her at the least with special respect, even if we do not as far as some traditions in veneration and intercession. She bore and nurtured the Son of God, without her willingness God could not have appeared on earth in human form, and her female persona is an important encouragement to many people of faith. A few years ago I stayed for a few weeks in Ireland near Knock, where in 1879 local villagers witnessed an apparition of the Virgin Mary, later declared authentic by the Catholic Church. I visited the shrine built on the site on a few occasions and attended worship. It was a beautiful and uplifting place, and the

worship inspiring. It might not be my tradition, and I might not believe all that Catholics do about Mary, but the experience blessed me, and reminded me how much Christian people need to learn from each other, as did Mary from her own son!

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 14<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today the church remembers Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan Priest: one of ten twentieth century martyrs commemorated by statues sculpted for empty niches on the West Front of Westminster Abbey, unveiled in 1998. He had founded a Franciscan Community based on prayer, cheerfulness, and poverty. At the beginning of the WWII he sent most of the friars home away from danger. The monastery became a refuge for 3,000 Poles and 1,500 Jews. He produced a daily newspaper critical of the Third Reich, resulting in his internment in Auschwitz in May 1941. He secretly continued his priestly ministry, hearing confessions and smuggling in bread and wine for a eucharist. An escape attempt resulted in ten prisoners being selected to die by starvation. One of those chosen cried out, 'My wife! My children!' Kolbe stepped forward and said, 'I am a Catholic Priest. I wish to die for that man. I am old; he has a wife and children.' In their underground bunker, Kolbe encouraged the others to die with dignity, leading prayers and psalms, recalling Christ's passion, and maintaining calmness. After two weeks he was the only one left alive, and calmly received a lethal injection on 14<sup>th</sup> August, 1941.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

On moving into our home, I was delighted to find two greengage trees which took me right back to childhood. A neighbour used to give us some of their greengages and I absolutely loved them, but have almost never eaten any since. Today was my fifth harvest and the best. As well as a reasonable number (we don't get pounds), for the first year there was no sign of plum moth, a tiny pink caterpillar which when you open the plum sticks its little brown head in the air as if it's waving at you and wanting to be friends. These greengages are all gift. I did not plant them and I do nothing to care for them. All I had to do today was to be very careful climbing the ladder and say a prayer of thanks. So much that I am and that I have is the result of what someone else did for me: my parents, teachers, family, friends, my prosperous country. 'No man is an island,' wrote John Donne, 'entire of itself'. All I have to do is reap the benefit, say a prayer of thanks, and be inspired to give as well as to receive.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Escaped the forecast excessive heat today by heading to a seaside resort with a cafe operating the government's Eat out to Help out scheme. After lunch I sat watching the waves roll in and listening to the rhythmic sound of the surf, and watching a bee quietly flitting about the marigolds in front of me. With such an aural and visual feast, how could I not feel at peace and utterly content with life? A colleague once told me that when he was in a meeting that was tediously boring or tense, he would close his eyes and conjure up the waves on his favourite beach. I thought of the Bible verse which I believe needs writing in big letters on every wall across our land. Hebrews 13.5: 'Be content with what you have'. I know there are troubled souls whose circumstances are so dire that they need to be changed, but too many

people are caught up in the crazy acquisitive desire that destroys them and their peace of mind, always wanting more and better, everything from a new telly to a new husband or wife. They need the salvation of simplicity, to be content with what they have.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 11<sup>th</sup> August**

Today is the feast of Clare, founder of the Minoresses, known as the Poor Clares. She was born into a wealthy family at Assisi, and at eighteen she was so moved by the preaching of St Francis that she renounced her possessions to join him in his ministry and prayer. She became a Benedictine nun until Francis was able to provide a small house for her and her companions. In 1215 she became Abbess of this community of women wishing to live according the rule and spirit of Francis and his brothers. She inspired her mother and two sisters to join, and the nuns lived in poverty and austerity, more extreme than other monasteries. She lived in joyful contemplative prayer, never leaving Assisi, even when her order was rapidly spreading across the world. For her last 27 years she was often ill, but continued in prayer and sewing altar cloths. Assisi was twice in danger of being attacked by enemies and on one occasion she asked her nuns to carry her to the wall of the convent carrying a pyx containing the blessed sacrament, at which point the armies fled. No 'Thought' needed: her life speaks for itself.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 10<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

I've just walked to church enjoying the colours of the wildflowers in bloom: mainly thistle, ragwort, and rosebay willow herb. A few weeks ago, the backdrop to the flowers was a medley of bright arresting greens. Today the leaves had grown dull, and the grasses had begun to yellow. A dry but overcast day, all this struck my senses as a promise of Autumn. I love and appreciate every single season of an English year, and I learn the important lesson of loving every season of my life. I don't just mean every age I arrive at, but also the seasons of each portion of my life. There are seasons to our working life, to marriage and family, to friendships, to health and strength, etc. Some of our seasons will be bright and verdant. When they are dull and yellowing, the flowers will still be there: the comforting hand or word given or received, the chance to spend longer on the phone or start a new hobby, the time available for prayer and drawing closer to God. For me, Autumn starts with the equinox, this year 2.30pm on 22nd September, and they'll be snowdrops in winter again.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 9<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Out for a walk I saw a field of ripening wheat next to the path. The crop was changing colour producing a pleasing mixture of green and straw-coloured stalks. As I admired this my eye travelled upwards to the tower of a local church about two miles away on the horizon. The tower appeared the identical bright straw colour of the wheat that had ripened. I was surprised by this, because in my mind's eye that church is the colour of uninspiring weathered stone: dull browns and greys. I realised the sun was brightening the colour I normally saw. It took me a while to tear myself away. The church being the same colour as a living plant seemed to bring it alive. Like many people, I often find it easier to pray in the open air, where the natural world makes me feel close to God, but I have also often been

overwhelmed by a sense of God's presence in a church service, or in a church on my own. Churches and the natural world both provide 'liminal space', the threshold between earth and heaven. They are living places where we can come alive, and change becomes possible.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Like many other people, during the lockdown I have enjoyed spending more time on my garden. Recently a local garden centre was telling me that they have been exceptionally busy, with people turning to gardening afresh or for the first time. I am delighted about this, not just because gardening is a healthy activity which connects us with God's creation, but also because many garden centres and nurseries are small independent businesses. I have a soft spot for small businesses, and I often think they will be the salvation of our country. My father ran a small business, as have some of my family. Unfortunately, people so often prefer to shop in huge chain stores, where they have no idea where the goods came from, or their quality, or how well the workers were treated. This results in depressing uniformity: high streets, shopping centres and retail parks all looking exactly the same, and the sad loss of relating to a shop keeper you have got to know well. I love supporting independent tradespeople: they give me helpful service, good advice, even cheaper prices sometimes, and the all-important friendly chat we all need.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Thinking about the pilgrimage route I'm creating reminded me of the time I produced a new route for a Christian Aid sponsored walk. I set it in a scenically beautiful area and made it the shape of a figure of eight, with one loop 5 miles long and other 10. So participants could choose 5, 10, or 15 miles. I planned the 10-mile section myself and another committee member the 5. On the day of the walk, I marshalled near the end, to hear what the 10 and 15-mile walkers thought of the new route. One of them came up to me with a huge smile on his face and said, 'I'd like to meet the person who planned that walk,' and went into raptures about it. Some time later, another man stormed up to me and said exactly the same words, but in a furious tone with a scowl on his face. (The 5-mile section was 'too steep'). A study claimed that 55% of communication is non-verbal. If an email upsets you, or even a phone call, remember: you may need the tone of voice, and possibly body language, for real understanding.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today is the Feast of the Transfiguration, and also the 75th anniversary of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. At the Transfiguration, Jesus took Peter, James and John up a mountain where 'he was transfigured before them, and his face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white.' (Matthew 17.2). At Hiroshima another 'brilliant flash of white' was witnessed when the bomb exploded. As a result of the Transfiguration, the disciples saw that God had come to earth as a man. At Hiroshima, men killed 70,000 to 80,000 people (mostly civilians) either instantly or from the firestorm on the first day, with the death toll increasing to up to 140,000 in the years that followed. At the Transfiguration, men saw the glory of God. At Hiroshima the citizens witnessed the glory of humankind's

scientific achievement. After the Transfiguration, Jesus died and rose again, flooding the world with the love of God. After Hiroshima, the world has gone on being flooded with the hatred, pain and destruction caused by the selfishness of humanity. Always remember 6th August and think of the power of our God of love and stop blaming God for the pain of the world.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

Today is the feast of St Oswald. He was son to the king of Northumbria. In 616AD his father was ousted and he fled to Scotland. God worked through this because in Scotland Oswald was converted to Christianity at the Iona monastery. In 633 he returned to Northumbria and defeated the tyrannical king Cadwalla at Hevenfelt near Hexham. As king, Oswald appealed to Iona to send a mission to convert Northumbria and when they arrived he gifted Aidan and his monks the Island of Lindisfarne for their monastery, near his own royal residence at Bamburgh. He continued to offer support and protection, enabling Lindisfarne to become the powerhouse for the conversion of England in the North. We readily remember holy monks and Christian leaders, but we forget at our peril the crucial importance of holy kings and politicians, who have used their power to assist Christian mission. We should pray for them ceaselessly, and indeed for all politicians that they will be true defenders of the faith. Oswald proved to be a fine king, but was killed after only eight years by pagan forces under king Penda of Mercia, and is honoured by the church as a martyr.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> August 2020**

With so many sparrow and starling families gobbling up food from our seed and fat ball feeders, we bought a large sack of bird seed instead of the usual small bags. I have just been refilling the tub I keep the seed in. Pouring in the seed from the sack I wanted to get as much in as possible to make it last before another refill. It reminded me of Jesus' words in Luke 6.38: 'Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.' So I kept pressing the seed into the tub, and shaking it, and it's amazing how much more I got in. In Jesus' day when they went to buy seed or corn, they would hope for a merchant who would keep pressing down the seed and shaking their container and filling it so it ran over. When we bless others by being generous, we always get back, in various ways, more than we gave. Can you think of an example of that in your own life?

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> August 2020**

I have just attended a church service using the 1662 Book of Common Prayer. The first version was written in 1549 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, with a revision in 1552, and hardly changed since. I believe that Cranmer would approve of the Church of England moving largely to modern English services. He said he wanted church services to be in language plainly understood by everyone: hence "common" prayer. Occasionally I love to attend old Prayer Book services, because Cranmer was a brilliant liturgist, and his prayer book one of the greatest works of English literature, containing captivating metaphors and phrases we still use today, and drawing the worshipper into a sense of the divine with its rich

phraseology and cadences of expression. A privilege for me was visiting Lambeth palace, home of the archbishop of Canterbury, and seeing, in a gallery room in the chapel, the spot where Cranmer wrote his prayer book. Hallowed ground, I think, because although we can pray anywhere with any words or with none, his book has proved a vehicle for millions to enter the presence of God. Give thanks for people gifted with words; may they always use their gift to uplift and inspire.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> August 2020**

Today I showed a friend round the city. We stopped at one of my favourite statues: of a migrant family; mother father, daughter and son, four of over two million people who passed through the city in Victorian times on their long and arduous journey to America. The family has their possessions in a small bag, a hat box and a small chest: all they could carry. They passed through, but we are descendants of migrants who stayed: ancient Britons, Celts, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Vikings, French, Irish, etc: people who had the guts to leave the familiar behind to seek a better life. We are the descendants of immigrants, and we are all a mongrel mixture of various nationalities. According to widely accepted theories, the origin of the whole human race goes back 200,000 years or more, with modern humans quite likely originating from one woman and spreading across the globe. Understanding our common humanity should prevent us from looking down on anyone, whether of a different colour, gender, creed, or social class. We all brothers and sisters of the same ancestor, called to give a helping hand to people treading the same often long and arduous journey of life.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> August 2020**

I've thought more about the sand martins I saw on my walk yesterday. Each one seemed to fly around for ages before they headed into the cliff to feed their young. They can catch a lot of insects before they need to take them into the nest, which is a chamber at the end of a 45 to 90 cm tunnel. I started wondering what they do if when they return to their nest the next year, the cliff has collapsed, but of course they just make another. I once lived in a house when house martins returned each year and nested under the eaves, often adding another nest or two each year. I loved to watch their mesmerising, acrobatic feeding on the wing. You could say martins are the champions of manoeuvrability: they twist and twirl and duck and dive to catch the food, and they build new nests wherever they need them. Blessed are people who are manoeuvrable enough to change their ways when they need to, learn new lessons, look for new horizons. We should respect the wisdom of old ways, but never cling to the past when it has become as helpful as a collapsing cliff.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 31<sup>st</sup> July 2020**

Today I walked a cliff top path enjoying sea views, sand martins flying in and out of their nests feeding their young, and an abundance of wild flowers, all to the orchestral backdrop of the surf rolling in. Quite idyllic, and it made me think about exactly why we enjoy cliff tops so much. Of several possible reasons the one that stays with me is because it makes us feel safe. This must seem counterintuitive for people who live where the cliffs crumble into the sea at an alarming rate, but it's how it feels to me, and I wonder if it's because it makes us aware both of change and permanence at the same time. Like the cliffs, our lives are

punctuated by loss: friends, family, job, health, ways of life, and as a result our sense of security can feel as eroded as the cliffs. But every day the sea rolls in, the tides come and go, and it never changes, and if we allow it, that will remind us that God never changes, and that whatever we face in life, whatever we suffer even, the Everlasting Arms are always underneath us, sustaining, never failing ...

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today the church remembers three anti-slavery campaigners. Olaudah Equiano was an actual slave. Born in Benin (Nigeria) around 1745, and enslaved as a child, he was transported to the Caribbean. He managed to purchase his freedom in 1766, and moved to London and married. Leaders of the abolitionist movement persuaded him to speak and write about his experience through which he became a powerful proponent. Thomas Clarkson was a Church of England Deacon overwhelmed by a spiritual experience. While at Cambridge he won an essay competition about slavery in 1785. Travelling by horse soon after, he was suddenly horror-struck by the details of what he had written and driven to take action for the abolitionist cause. In 1787 the evangelical Christian MP William Wilberforce was persuaded by Clarkson and others to put his parliamentary muscle behind the campaign. The “Black lives matter” campaign has shown us the harm done by our nation, including Christian people. Our response should be that of Olauda Equine towards the end of his life, quoting Micah: ‘What makes any event important, unless by its observation we become better and wiser, and learn “to do justly, to love mercy, and to walk humbly before God?”’

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today in the church calendar we are invited to remember ‘Companions of our Lord’, ie. the sisters Mary and Martha and their brother Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead. They lived at Bethany on the hill outside Jerusalem, and Jesus often visited and stayed with them in their home, which especially became a safe haven in the days leading up to his arrest. Friends come in all shapes and sizes; we may have many or few, and we may have different relationships with each of them. They may be the friend with whom we can share our deepest secrets and thoughts, or the friend who makes us laugh when we need it, or the friend we can walk with or talk with, or test out our latest opinions on. We may feel anything for them from the simple satisfaction of being with a like-minded companion through to deep affection and love. Even though in our faith we believe Jesus to have been divine, he was also a human being, and he seems to have needed and valued his friends. Treasure yours; respect them, care for them, be thankful for them.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

On my break away I walked through a housing estate where every home sported a large, beautifully manicured front lawn with a prim weedless flower patch, but one had solved the high maintenance effort with an artificial lawn. In its centre was a large square of artificial landscaping: a row of grey bricks bordering a white mini-chipping strip and then a strip of terracotta block paving. Very neat. Then came the surprise: in the centre was a small cottage style garden packed full of living plants. I guess that a few weeks ago it looked stunning with

all the plants in bloom, but most of them were past their best with some gone to seed, so the effect was rather an untidy mess, out of place with the perfection of their artificial setting and the rest of the estate. In our culture, we set great store by appearance, but we easily neglect what's in the centre of us: the fearful, mixed up, angry, overtired, faltering bits at the heart of us. We imagine it isn't seen, and pretend it isn't there, but attending to it is life giving. Let some forgiveness, prayer, stillness bring colour back to your hearts.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 27<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Arriving back home after a three-day break, the growth in the garden was more noticeable than one sees on a daily basis. The Ena Harkness climbing rose has suddenly spurted its blood red fragrance across the fence, in its second bloom of the season. The sweet pea plants I had denuded before leaving had resprouted at least as many blooms, like those trick candles you cannot blow out. The afternoon butterfly count on the buddleia had escalated from just one orange white to two plus eight peacocks. I felt overwhelmed with delight and gratitude and the age-old question came into my mind, 'What have I done to deserve the gift of all this beauty.' And not just in my garden; a simple visual delight while I was away was a patch of wild flowers growing by a peaceful river. I have only ever found one answer to that question which makes any sense to me: I haven't done anything to deserve it, (and woe betide me if I ever think I have, lest such arrogance turn me sour). The beauty is the gift of a generous Creator, and knowing that is the greatest of life's gifts to me.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

The other day two or three people told me how much they appreciate these Thoughts and suddenly a worry hit that people might imagine I have myself achieved the peace, harmony, love, and forgiveness I describe; devoted to good works, in constant prayer, overcoming all obstacles. Of course I have not. A wise spiritual counsellor told me years ago, 'You'll be a sinner when you die,' and I will. My aim in the Thoughts is to pass on snippets of wisdom I have learnt over the years from other people, from the Bible, other reading, and from life: wisdom that has helped me in my struggle through life. I like to think that by God's grace I really have overcome at least to some degree my negative and sinful tendencies, but I identify with the wise words of the converted former slave trader John Newton, towards the end of his life:

'I am not what I ought to be,  
I am not what I want to be,  
I am not what I hope to be in another world;  
but still I am not what I once used to be,  
and by the grace of God I am what I am'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today is the Feast Day of James the Apostle, who was one of Jesus' Twelve Apostles, and also in his inner circle with John and Peter. He and his brother John were nicknamed Sons of Thunder, which they showed when they suggested calling down fire from heaven on the

Samaritan village that refused to offer them all hospitality. Maybe their aggressive personalities were encouraged by their mother who asked Jesus if they could have pride of place in his kingdom. Jesus realised that such leadership material could be powerful so set about teaching James humility and he became a leader in the early church though sadly not for long, being executed by Herod in 44AD. By tradition his remains are buried at the church at Compostela in Spain. From the medieval times, thousands have undertaken the famous Camino pilgrimage there, and have benefited from the hospitality of hostels on the way. Hospitality is one of the greatest of Christian ministries that we all, both churches and individuals, should strive to offer, and blessed are those who exercise it, but, as James had to learn in Samaria, it should always be encouraged and never demanded.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 24<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

It has been difficult to buy fat balls. This week we got some and filled the bird feeder. Within a few hours, at least one family of starlings arrived; they go for fat balls. The sparrows were taking it in turns to feed for a few moments at the seed feeder, and then they would give way to one of the others. The goldfinch arrived on his own to have his leisurely meal uninterrupted at the nyjer seed feeder. All very sedate. But the starlings instantly became a vicious delinquent mob around the fat ball feeder, shattering the afternoon peace. The juveniles were screeching and pecking at each other to get their feed. Talk about sibling rivalry! Watching the sparrows, I had a sudden appreciation of one of the greatest virtues of the British people: the ability to form queues. I don't think I appreciated how blessed we are in this until I travelled abroad and tried to get on a train, only to be faced with starling mentality. I'm not trying to be racist here, but I think that when as a nation we have got something right, we should be thankful for it, and equally importantly, protect it.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2020**

Recently my peaceful early morning walk was shattered by cars rushing past my home to get to the city for work. My mind went back to a briefing I attended fifty years ago for young people volunteering overseas. One of the speakers from a developing country was telling us how different life was there: more relaxed with a different pace. He had us laughing about the first time he worked in London. He was amazed to exit his office at the end of his first few afternoons to see people rushing past him. 'I was puzzled about this,' he said, 'I wondered where they were going. So after a few days I followed them to find out what was happening, and where it was, what was so important and exciting that they had to rush. After following people for a few days I found out where they were going; they weren't going anywhere!' Sometimes we have to rush: for work, or because something has happened to slow us down, or to help someone. But it's easy to live life so fast that we end up going nowhere. Hopefully the lockdown is teaching us to stop, look, and breathe.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2020**

Today is the feast day of Mary Magdalene. Poor Mary: so many myths and untruths told about her! That she was a prostitute: no evidence whatsoever - the result of the 7<sup>th</sup> century church confusing Bible passages. She was likely a respectable widow with freedom and wealth to support Jesus' mission. That she was a particularly sinful woman: no evidence;

Jesus cast seven demons out of her, but that doesn't make her especially bad. She either had mental illness or some sort of spiritual oppression, which can happen to anyone. She had the courage to seek healing from Jesus. That she was Jesus' lover: no evidence and absurd - Jesus had clearly opted for celibacy to fulfil his mission. Mary was devoted to him in that she followed him to his death and was rewarded by being the first witness of the resurrection. She was clearly one of his leading followers, to be ranked alongside Peter and John, and at last the church is recognising her as such. But we know almost no facts about her; modern books and films are mostly fiction. Ignore them and go for the truth: an ordinary person like you, showing you the rewards of following Jesus.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> July 2020**

My car has just passed its MOT and with the answered prayer cat story I told you last week on my mind, it reminded me of my answered prayer car story. A colleague was leaving and wanted rid of his old Fiesta diesel. He wasn't sure what condition it was in, so he offered it me cheap and I bought it. After a few weeks I had it serviced. When I collected it, the mechanic looked worried and took me to one side. 'I'm sorry to tell you this,' he said, 'but the injectors are practically shot and to replace them will be more than the car's worth.' So as with the cat, I got down on my knees: 'Lord, I'm not prepared to be dishonest so I'll never sell the car when I tell buyers what's wrong. I don't know what to do so I put the matter in Your hands.' Within a week the car was stolen and never came back, and the insurance company was generous. God's care for us is such that nothing is too small for Him to bother with, and God, I believe, has a wonderful sense of humour.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Setting off for an early morning walk recently my eye was caught by our nasturtium plants and I broke into a smile, my day immediately brightened up by the reds, oranges and yellows of one of the most cheerful plants in existence. A bit later on my breath was taken away by a rose in someone's garden with gorgeous yellow and orange petals at the centre turning to delicate pink toward the outer edge, and a little later another garden was graced by a hydrangea with side plate sized delicate pink flower heads. The rose you would describe as beautiful and the hydrangea peace giving, but only the nasturtium could be described as cheerful. It made me think how important for life cheerfulness is, and how we must always thank God for cheerful people, who are such a gift. They are like the sun breaking through on a gloomy day, or the unexpected gift, or a favourite piece of music coming on the radio. They brighten the day and lift our spirits. Practice cheerfulness. Spread it around. If you find it hard, buy nasturtium seeds and grow them in your garden or on your windowsill. They will be your mentor.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

I recently came across a pinfold, probably 18th century. It had a circular cobble-built wall with an entrance gap. I discovered that pinfolds enclosed stray animals found on private land, or common without permission. They were rounded up by the pinder who charged a fine for their release. Like leaving your car in the wrong place and paying a fine for wheel clamp

release. Paying fines for wrong behaviour is part of life. We may have to pay a literal fine if we break the law, or we may pay the fine of a broken relationship if we treat someone badly, or the fine of a broken body if we misuse it. The pinfold I saw was beautifully managed with a lawn, a small tree, inner walls clothed with flowers and shrubs: peaceful space a few yards in diameter with a bench to sit and be still. A good place to sit and forgive oneself for messing up life in some way and paying some sort of fine for it. As well as doing our best to put right any harm we've done and asking God's forgiveness, forgiving ourselves is health giving and I believe God desires it, too.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

A couple of days ago I noticed a flax crop in a field between a pea and an oilseed rape field. A farmer told me that less rape is being grown because of cabbage stem flea beetle which attacks it. The chemical that controls it has been banned by the EU, so rape is no longer commercially viable. I grew up in farming country in the Midlands, and I remember when rape first started to be grown in the late 60s/early 70s. People thought its bright yellow colour unnatural, garish, out of place among the gentler green and straw colour tones of an English countryside. But people have got used to it and enjoy both the colour and the scent, and like it when it escapes to the verges as a pleasant wild flower. Unless the flea beetle problem is solved, we shall see much less of it. So we shall have to get used to another change, maybe seeing the blues of flax and borage and the bluish green of broad beans. It's probably best to respond as to all change, by enjoying the new, and thanking God for the wide variety of nutrition the earth provides.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Friday 17<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Thinking of cats yesterday reminded me of a favourite answered prayer. After finding a mouse in a kitchen drawer, I got a tom kitten. Shortly afterwards, we let it into our walled garden on a sunny evening. In the area there roamed a lot of stray cats from demolished factories. One of them followed the kitten into our house and killed it. I got down on my knees: 'Lord we need a cat, please, but surely the same thing will keep happening?' Shortly afterwards we swapped house with friends for a holiday. We met for a picnic where we crossed on our return journeys. 'It's a lovely cat you've got,' they said. 'We haven't got a cat.' 'Oh dear, this lovely 6-month-old female cat cried at the door. We assumed it was yours and have been feeding it.' Back home, after enquiries we found the owner and returned it. The next day she brought it back. 'I think my cat escaped because it needs a garden,' she said, 'I don't have one. You do. Would you like it?' It was perfect, and instead of attacking it, the local cats helped her produce litters of beautiful kittens.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today I noticed a cat looking intently into a hedge, obviously hunting. It struck me afresh that cats don't run from humans like wildlife, being, of course domesticated. Wild animals are wise to avoid us. It's often said that humans are the only animal that kills for sport. Arguably that's not true, as other creatures are known to kill when they don't need to, including cats, but we seem to be masters at it. But didn't God appoint us for power in the

Genesis creation story: 'Fill the earth and subdue it; have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.' The problem is, that because we have power, it is easy to imagine we can do as we please, including polluting the earth and destroying life. As Lord Acton famously wrote 133 years ago, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.' Only when we have mastered our aggressive tendencies; when no creature ever runs from us, only then we will be the true masters God intended. Cats trust us because we have been kind to them. True power reeks of kindness.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today the feast of St Swithun. My father taught me the well-known folklore: if it rains on St Swithun's day it will rain for 40 days and if fine there will be no rain for 40 days. Living in the ninth century Swithun became chaplain to Egbert king of Wessex and tutor to his son Ethelwulf who then made his old tutor bishop of the capital Winchester when he became king. As Bishop, Swithun built up his Diocese in the face of Viking raids. He was known for building many churches and for his charitable giving. He was buried in the cemetery according to his request, but when Winchester became the first cathedral to have monks, Swithun's remains were reburied there, on 15th July 971. That occasion was marked by miraculous cures and for a heavy thunderstorm, whence the origin of the folklore. So we remember a rhyme about weather but are ignorant of his example of hard work, charity, and healing. Similarly, we may like or dislike someone as quiet or noisy, attractive or unattractive, but often we don't trouble ourselves to discover their true qualities.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

A huge section of our fencing blew down in the February gales, and some remained leaning and the rest was left vulnerable to more wind damage. Because of the lockdown restrictions, the contractor was not able to begin work replacing the fence until today. I took advantage of the old fence's removal to dig up a clump of nettles that had been growing under it. I was surprised at how different our garden looked from the neighbour's side. This is an obvious parable of one of the most important lessons in life: to see things from another side, a different point of view. When someone has upset us, or when we have upset someone else and we cannot understand the reason for their hurt, we can become very defensive. All we think about is justifying our actions. But when we justify ourselves, or excuse ourselves, we are only looking at the problem from our own side, from our point of view. Blessed are those people who can instantly look at a quarrel from someone else's point of view; their defensiveness often turns to a healing apology. Is there another person's point of view you need to consider today?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today I drove past diggers and machinery placing rock armour to stop the erosion of the coast where the cliff edge has crept to just a few metres from the road I was on. The road will be rescued as a result, plus some housing. It feels good and right that homes and infrastructure are being saved, but if I look out to sea, I remember that many of the town's previous homes lie beneath the waves, including a 13th century church submerged a mile off

shore by the 15th century. Living at the edge could provoke insecurity, but for some local residents I've met it seems to inspire the opposite: an understanding that we live with uncertainty, that at any moment we may be faced with a dramatic shift in our circumstances that will change our lives forever, so why worry? 'Don't worry about tomorrow,' said Jesus, 'each day has enough troubles of its own.' I'm told that holding back the sea in one place tends to speed up the erosion either side. Change will sweep in like waves whatever we do. That's how life is, so let's just be content, live in the present, and find peace.  
Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 12<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

When I started these Thoughts for the Day, I decided never to write about books, TV or Radio shows, but only my daily experiences and observations (as well as Saints' Days). I am by nature extremely unobservant. In the Scouts I proved incapable of passing the observation test, whether following a trail or remembering a collection of items on a tray. On a walk, my inclination is to work out solutions to problems in my head rather than notice my surroundings with my eyes. Some years ago I determined to make an effort to observe instead, and gradually I get better at it, which helps me live in the present and enjoy the world around me. So in my Thoughts, focussing on what I have observed is important to me. Talking of which, I have been noticing what a stunningly green time of year this is. The fresh shoots of Spring have grown into full flood summer verdancy. I am trying just to look at this virescent feast without thinking. It's enough; and when I do no more than gaze at God's world, sometimes, in some deep part of me beyond my optical nerve, retina and brain, I see God.  
Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

The feast day of Benedict of Nursia, Abbot of Monte Cassino, regarded as the Father of Western Monasticism. Benedict lived from about 480 to 550 AD. By this time monasticism was a valuable asset in the East. Benedict's achievement was to introduce it into Italy whence it spread throughout the Western church. He organised his disciples into groups under the charge of an Abbot. He wrote an important Rule for his order, which was flexible, but based on the crucial framework of liturgical prayer, manual work, and sacred reading. The monasteries that resulted from this creative and powerful formula often became centres of learning, agriculture, hospitality and medicine. Nowadays, with much of their work taken over by the secular organisations, people may question the value of monasteries today, and sadly, it has become the habit of some to ridicule and criticise religious orders. But one day, the colossal contribution they have made to global learning and flourishing will be understood. We should treat them with the honour and respect they deserve, and if we ever have the opportunity to take a retreat at a monastery we should seize it, because it can be life changing.  
Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

In the Autumn I dug up an inherited bed of daylilies. They had become overcrowded, so I thinned and replanted them. Yesterday the first flower appeared, and it is magnificent: salmon pink and double crowned, better than anything I remember from previous years. I

have much it enjoyed from last evening to now, and I have just noticed our thrush enjoying a splashing in the bird bath behind it, presenting a pretty summer evening picture for me. Although the plants are growing more vigorously, I doubt there will be as many flowers as last year. I suppose they need longer to root and settle, but the first indicates quality rather than quantity this year. Some people seem able to fill their lives with a huge variety of activities while others focus on just a few. Nevertheless, I wonder if sometimes we overcrowd our lives trying to cram in all types of activity and experience, when we might produce better quality and more meaning by doing less. "Less is more" is a wise proverb, and taking to discover our true calling at any one time can be a wise choice.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

I have just seen a church where a window on the South side of the chancel has been extended by adding an extra lancet. There is a tradition that this was done on the instruction of a poor sighted vicar, to help him read his prayer book. The effect on the outside is of a lopsided window. I cannot imagine permission being given for it nowadays. More's the pity, I think. The wonky window is an interesting feature, with a story to tell. I once bought a painting from an artist who told me he preferred to work with watercolour because you couldn't paint over mistakes, but it was when the unintended happened that new possibilities occurred. I also heard a famous photographer tell how he still worked with film, because the blemishes it produced led to creative possibilities. When your life has been messed up by yourself or others, God, the greatest artist, can use the blemish to make it more beautiful than ever. That church has lost the beautiful symmetry of perfect windows, but has gained the inspiring story of a vicar who would go to any lengths to make sure he could say his morning prayers.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Today I pulled up some poppies before they flowered. You might think me brutal. They were here before I arrived. I liked them so I encouraged them. Now they are everywhere, and unless I keep on top of them, they take over. So I let some grow, and enjoy the sudden sight of a different colour among clumps of perennials. But unless I pull up the others, they grow tall around flowers nearby and stop the enjoyment of them. There are also Welsh Poppies which get everywhere, but they are a gentle sort of flower whose little yellow smiles could never get in the way but only bring cheer. Like the poppies, sometimes we have to pull out of our lives good things that stop us living the life we know we should., like always having our head stuck in a good book to the exclusion of our nearest and dearest, or addiction to a good hobby stopping us ever contacting our needy friend. Like the poppies, it can be harder to root out good things from our lives than the weeds, the things we know are wrong. Sometimes we have to be brutal.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Recent rain has caused our lawn to sprout like fury, and the great swathes I had left uncut for bees to enjoy the clover have grown to the height of meadow grass. So today I tackled it, but with only half done there is more grass clipping than the council bin, the roses, and my compost bins can usefully take, even though I have seven of them. I like composting. I love

the fact that you can throw in just about anything organic, turn it all over occasionally, keep it reasonably moist, and leave natural chemicals, insects, and maybe some worms, to transform a dying smelly mess, in just a few months or a year or two, into a sweet smelling crumbly substance that will help make my sweet peas bloom and my leeks swell. 'All things work together for good,' wrote St Paul, 'to those who love God.' The smelly mess of our worst sins, our dashed and dying hopes, our deepest hurts, can be transformed by God into the sweet smelling joys of being forgiven, of finding new pathways even in pain, of the peace of forgiving others, all of which make our lives bloom and swell.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Monday 6<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

Thomas More was beheaded on Tower Green 485 years ago today. He was a brilliant man, a fair and incorruptible lawyer, an accomplished writer, appointed by Henry VIII to several high offices. He was an ascetic, imposing strict discipline upon himself in his determination to follow the way of Christ. When he realised that Henry wanted to take power over the church, he resigned as chancellor and tried to live a quiet life in the country. But his silence over the King's policies cast doubt upon them so Henry insisted he give assent. But More realised that Henry, as a mere secular ruler, was taking upon himself the sacred office of head of the church given by Christ to Peter and his successors, so he refused to repudiate the authority of the Pope and was condemned to death as a traitor. On the scaffold, he said he died for the faith of the church, and was 'the king's good servant, but God's first.' He told his executioner, 'Thou wilt give me this day a greater benefit than any mortal man can be able to give me. Pluck up thy spirits, man, and be not afraid to do thine office.'

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

On my morning walk in a nearby field today I saw a small blue flash in front of me. I stood still, suspecting a damsel fly but if it was it didn't return. It reminded me of how last summer I had stood for several minutes in the middle of my lawn watching a dragonfly flit around me. It was mesmerising and utterly beautiful. We should hold onto these flashes of the glory of nature. Their remembrance can encourage us on gloomier days, when all seems grey. That's why we should hold onto all the flashes of the glory and presence of God, and never tire of remembering them and telling others about them: an answered prayer, the moment we first believed, a time we felt the power of God or sensed His Presence, that small miracle we saw. If we look, we may see them more often. And other people, I find, genuinely want to hear about them.

Stay safe,

Every blessing

### **Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> July 2020**

My hope for the lockdown easing is fear. Fear of Covid 19 is stemming its spread. We have learnt to be anxious lest the person approaching us is infected. I suppose the cave people who survived were similarly anxious that the approaching strangers might mean them harm. Fear of the right kind is healthy and necessary: we teach children to fear fire and road traffic. But the wrong kind of fear is destructive and can spread like a virus. Racism is fear of others and grows when people write or say horrible things about people with a different language or skin colour, rather than taking the trouble to talk to them and get to know another section of the

myriad and wonderful variety of human life. This kind of fear can extend to people in a different age group or a different part of town. Jesus saw fear itself as the great danger. 'Don't be afraid,' was his constant clarion call. The opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. Who or what are you afraid of today? Can you put that fear in God's hands, change it to faith, and take the action you are called to?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2020**

Today the feast of St Thomas, one of Jesus' twelve disciples. Tradition tells us that Thomas was a missionary and martyr in India, thus proving his faith and commitment, and justifying Jesus' choice of him. I think Thomas is overly criticised for refusing to believe his fellow disciples' claim that Jesus had risen, saying, 'Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.'

Atheists or agnostics often tell me, men especially, that they only believe what they can see. Yet I can think of men I've known come to faith through seeing: one through seeing a special quality in his Christian friend, another through seeing the wonder of life in his newborn child, another through seeing (at the same time as his wife) a vision of Jesus in a small Christian gathering, another through seeing love and care at his local church, and many more. For faith, Thomas didn't have to touch Jesus' wounds, but just see and hear him. People don't always have to see very much, before like Thomas, they proclaim, 'My Lord and my God!'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2020**

Following my thoughts on bindweed, I once had a garden full of buttercups, too pretty to be called a weed, but a creeping nuisance. I dug out what seemed like a thousand over a few years. At last the garden looked clear of them. Then I had a busy year away from gardening, and they all came back! I was chatting about them to some people, and a woman said, 'Oh you lucky thing! I love buttercups; please can I have a clump.' At first I refused. How could I inflict them elsewhere in the neighbourhood? But she persuaded me by insisting she would never leave the house, so no-one else would ever be troubled by them. A few years later I heard she'd moved. I felt guilty about the people who bought the house; I hoped they loved buttercups as much as she did, or at least learned to. Much of who we are and what we are, is inflicted on us by others: parents, siblings, friends, teachers, clergy, etc, as well as the hand we are dealt in life. We can live at peace only when we stop complaining and blaming others, instead learning acceptance, forgiveness, thanksgiving.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> July 2020**

My Thought yesterday that loving acceptance can change us for the better put me in mind of Anthony de Mello. He was an American priest, born in India, famous for his writing and teaching about prayer and spirituality. He says this about himself:

'I was a neurotic for years. I was anxious and depressed and selfish. Everyone kept telling me to change. I resented them, and I agreed with them, and I wanted to change, but simply couldn't, no matter how hard I tried. What hurt the most was that, like the others, my best friend kept insisting that I change. So I felt powerless and trapped. Then, one day, he said to me, "Don't change. I love you just as you are." Those words were music to my ears:

“Don't change. Don't change. Don't change . . . I love you as you are.” I relaxed. I came alive. And suddenly I changed! Now I know that I couldn't really change until I found someone who would love me whether I changed or not.’

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Despite the ministrations of previous residents and neighbours while the house was empty, when we arrived a few years back I found my new garden to be full of bindweed. I went on the attack, and through a lot of deep digging, and judicious use of weedkiller, there is little left. It has, though, appeared in a few places recently, so I will have to dig it out when I can without damaging the plants and spray or paint on weedkiller when I can't, but very carefully so as not to touch the plants with it. If I don't, within a year or two it will take over the garden again. I haven't tried one solution I read of: to position sticks which the bindweed can grow up instead of the plants, and then enjoy its white trumpet flowers. Like my bindweed, some sin we have to deal with drastically, like criminal or abusive behaviour. But sometimes the best way to deal with the unpleasant traits and actions we can't stand in others is lovingly to accept them, like letting bindweed grow up sticks, because the most powerful force to change anyone is love.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 29<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

It is the Feast of St Peter, in the Bible the foremost of Jesus' disciples, and in his inner circle of three, but appearing as a clown and coward: always putting his foot in it, saying the wrong thing, and shortly after promising loyalty even to death, he pretended he didn't even know Jesus at his arrest. But Jesus loved him, and after the resurrection, Peter's courage surged. Through his willingness to have a go he achieved great things: leader of the Jerusalem church in its early days, the first to admit Gentiles into the church, and the first to perform a miracle, and then many were attributed to him. He contributed to Mark's gospel and wrote the New Testament letter 1 Peter. He travelled to the Empire's capital Rome and ministered and preached there. When Jesus caused him to land a miraculous catch of fishes Peter fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, 'Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!'. Peter knew his weakness, and so constantly depended on the Holy Spirit. According to tradition he was martyred in the persecution of Nero (probably 64AD) crucified head down because did not want to emulate his Lord.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 28<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

I recently saw a notice: 'This is a No-Cold Calling Zone'. Because Covid 19, is a cold virus, I thought it was trying to stop anyone with a cold entering the street. Afterwards I realised it must be a prohibition on anyone Cold Calling there. When I saw it again, I decided my mistake was understandable because the hyphen (-) (or was it a dash?) between No and Cold, seemed to separate Cold from Calling to the extent that the natural meaning is 'Keep away if you have a cold.' I contacted a punctuation expert friend who agreed the notice was confusing, and suggested an en dash (–) somewhere else. I like to get punctuation right, because I think it important, but even more important is what I take the trouble to punctuate my life with: a serious framework of full stops to the actions which lessen me or harm others,

fearless use of exclamation marks of wild expressions of joy at life and fantastic encouragements to others, hourly question marks of humble admitting I don't know the answer, all liberally sprinkled with the commas of pauses to be with the One who made such a beautifully ordered world.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 27<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

After 6 phone calls to KCom broadband and Apple computers, my email problems are finally sorted out. It was a relief yesterday when the KCom technician achieved it for me. I congratulated him on his exemplary patience. He had taken his time to talk me carefully through settings changes and to send test emails, and he waited till I had rechecked everything to make sure it worked before I was satisfied enough to ring off. Computers can be infuriating when they go wrong, so I guess you must have to be extremely patient to advise users and work out a solution. One of my favourite Bible verses is Paul in his letter to the Philippians (1.6) saying, 'I am sure that my God who began a good work in you, will bring it to completion on the Day of Christ Jesus.' I have as much chance of making myself good enough to meet Jesus by my own efforts as I have of building a computer, but God is patient with me. If I ask Him, He gives me the Spirit to slowly work in me, and He will make sure I get there in the end.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 26<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

I am only human, so I sometimes feel anxious when I hear that I am in the coronavirus at risk age group. Then a few weeks ago the Bible came to my aid. Psalm 90.10: 'The years of our life are three score years and ten or if we have strength four score.' Nowadays our good nutrition, relatively comfortable lifestyles and competent medical intervention often give us the "strength" needed to live four score or beyond, but I still believe this verse to be as true as when it was written about 2,500 years ago. That means that every day over the norm of "three score and ten" is a bonus. So each morning I started to pray, 'Thank you, Lord, for bringing me to this 753rd (or whatever it was) bonus day of my life; help me to live it to your glory.' In the evening I thanked God for that bonus day and all that had happened. I found this astonishingly uplifting. It also made me live in the present, focussing just on the day, and eliminating any foolish and pointless regretting the past and fussing about the future. It works for me, why not try it?

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 25<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Last year we let our lawn grow longer than usual so that we could help the bees by providing a long-lasting feast of the clover growing in it. But the recent rain has caused the grass to sprout like fury. So I hit on a compromise: lawn artistry! I cut the lawn but left islands uncut where the clover was flourishing. I had only just started when I was stung by one of the bees. I couldn't tell the bee, 'I'm on your side; I'm not your enemy.' In conflict situations the problem is often communication. We misunderstand an innocent remark, or misread an email, or think someone sounds angry or bored on the phone when they are not. As a result we jump to conclusions and bad feeling begins. Communication has been so poor we may as well have been trying to speak with a bee. The Bible has the answer: James 1.19: 'Be quick

to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.' If you find this difficult, imagine it is Jesus you are speaking to. That will help you listen properly, showing the reverence you should always afford to any person, made in God's image like yourself.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Colour again. I was driving the other day through a village and my attention was caught by some flowers at the end of a driveway. I had to stop the car and open the window and spend time just looking at this group of tall marigolds in a single shade of pure, brilliant orange. Apparently, orange can inspire feelings of excitement. I realised afterwards that I had been uplifted and excited not just by the magnificence of the colour, but because such an ordinary, humble flower had provoked these feelings. I wondered if orange ought to be the colour we should use to signify this great Christian virtue of humility. You might expect the colour of humility to be brown since our word comes from the Latin 'humus', meaning 'earth' or 'ground'. This is because humble people practice lowliness of mind and action; they do humble tasks; they spend time with humble people. They are ready to see others better than themselves, and to give way to others when appropriate, not minding being ordinary, lowly, and in the background. Humility is desperately needed: world beating, so exciting that I want an exciting colour to proclaim it.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 23<sup>rd</sup> June 2020**

Yesterday, 22<sup>nd</sup> June, was the feast of St Alban, a pagan soldier in the town of Verulamium in Roman Britain in the third century. Christianity had gained a strong foothold in Britain but suffered persecution from Rome. Alban sheltered a fugitive priest and was converted through his witness. When soldiers searched the house, Alban swapped clothes with the priest, allowing him to escape. Alban was caught and beheaded in the amphitheatre, so becoming our first martyr. A thousand years later there was a dispute over whether his relics were at St Albans, the new town created round his shrine, or (wrongly) at Ely, where the shrine of St Etheldreda was situated. Etheldreda, whose feast day is today, was of a noble family but devoted herself to an austere, prayerful lifestyle and created a double monastery at Ely in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. After Alban, Christianity flourished in Britain with the conversion of the Roman empire, and then waned after the Anglo-Saxon invasion, until it was reconverted in the time of Etheldreda by the twin evangelistic thrust of Lindisfarne in the North and Augustine in the South. Let's be inspired to live and work for a new revival of faith today.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2020**

Today I have been stopped dead in my tracks by colour, on a quick morning walk round the village to get some fresh air. I noticed a yellow rose bush in a front garden. I nearly moved on but made myself stop; and look; and then look a bit longer. The colour was brilliant, almost as bright and pleasing as yellow can get without being glaring. Perfection. Dear Lord, forgive me when I rush through a day without stopping to admire the beauty you have lavished upon us. And all for free. Every day. When we just stop. And look. And enjoy. Dear Lord, why did you make this world so charming, so extravagantly lovely, so splashed about in wild abandon with an exquisite palette of colour; just so that we, your creatures could have

enjoyment, find peace and have our spirits lifted by myriad shade of green verdure, by a butterfly's wing, a thrush's breast, and an azure sky? Just so that this morning I could stop and see a rose. Thank you. Amen.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> June 2020**

Yesterday, I had to wear a mask for the first time, so today I wore one by choice to get used to the idea. I couldn't communicate with people properly. For me smiling at people with an open face is important. By nature, I am extremely shy. As a young person, I found it hard to engage with strangers or enter a social setting. But I made a commitment of my life to God aged 20, and I knew I had to learn to talk to strangers at the end of church services rather than rush back to my student digs and hide away. I don't know what other people in the church were praying for at the end of the service, but week after week I was begging God for the courage and the words just to stick around and talk. The prayer was answered because God, I believe, showed me the knack, and the healing of that part of me has gone on through my life, so nowadays I can normally walk up to a stranger and draw them into conversation. A mask seems to take me backwards, but no doubt God will show me the way forward.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 20<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Today I visited a church for the first time for what? Three months? Possibly the longest period I have ever had without being in a church for my whole life. As I entered, I felt awestruck, and with that frisson of fear which large empty churches could instil in me as a child, a vast unknown cavern with dark corners and roof spaces. I stood for a while just inside the door and let the feeling of awe that churches can inspire sweep over me. It felt good. As I moved around, I felt I was in the company of a reliable ancient friend: a place where prayers of the faithful have soaked into the walls over centuries. If there was a bit of staining showing here and there, and some stonework chipped, or roughened by age, it was only like the grandparent whose creaks and wrinkles and nodding off to sleep make him or her even more precious, because you know that however old fashioned and not quite with it they might be, underneath there is a wisdom that has come from living a life and they will always be there for you and love you.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 19<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Before the lockdown I tried to replace both my trainers and my walking boots but failed to find any suitable for the width I now need, and they had deteriorated to the point where they can hurt my feet. Today at last I found a shop with good boots and trainers that fit well. Tonight, though. I am nostalgic. My ten-year-old boots tramped my beloved Peak District Hills, with memories of companionship of family and friend, or of holy solitude. They accompanied me all over the UK in retirement, and last year bore me on my prayer walk. The seven-year-old trainers have hardly been off my feet, because I wear walking trainers so that I can just take off for a walk wherever I am. In recent years They have taken me all over South Holderness to meet people I could share my faith with. I thank God for my feet to transport me, my eyes to see His creation, and my lips to speak of Him. Tonight, I remember

those who made the shoes that have enabled it. Make sure your feet are shod, wrote St Paul, with the shoes of the gospel of peace.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

On a walk recently, transfixed by a stunning vista, I recalled a favourite poem of mine.

There was such beauty in the dappled valley  
As hurt the sight, as stabbed the heart to tears.  
The gathered loveliness of all the years  
Hovered thereover, it seemed eternally  
Set for men's joy. Town, Tower, trees, river  
Under a royal azure sky for ever  
Up-piled with snowy towering bulks of cloud  
A herald-day of spring more wonderful  
Than her true own. Trumpets cried aloud  
In sky, earth, blood; no beast, no clod so dull  
But the power felt of the day, and of the giver  
Was glad for life, humble at once and proud.  
Kyrie Eleison, and Gloria,  
Credo, Jubilate, Magnificat:  
The whole world gathered strength to praise the day.

Ivor Gurney (1890-1937), from Gloucestershire, was a composer and poet once described as “the most gifted man of his generation” but he was troubled by mental illness. It began in his teenage years, later exacerbated by his war service; he was wounded, gassed, and shell shocked. It is often the case that people like Ivor Gurney who suffer greatly should also discover and create such tender beauty.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Writing a couple of days ago about knowing the love of God even in pain reminded me of a man I used to visit. He was in his forties and had been paralysed in both legs and one arm by polio at the age of 20. He was cared for devotedly by his aged parents. I used to leave the house humbled and having received far more than I could give. I don't remember a trace of bitterness there, only a real interest in me and my life, and excitement about the very small pleasures they could enjoy. They always wanted me to pray for them, and I suspect that their secret was knowing, above everything, that God loved them. I have seen this secret revealed in a number of suffering people I have come across who, however bad their own troubles and illnesses, say, ‘I've nothing to complain about. There's plenty worse than me.’ My wheelchair friend and his Mum and Dad were rewarded for their faithfulness. When they could no longer look after him he had to go into care, and one of his carers, seeing the good in him, married him.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Today the church remembers Richard, Bishop of Chichester born 1197, mainly known for the prayer in his name:

Thanks be to Thee, my Lord Jesus Christ  
For all the benefits Thou hast given me,  
For all the pains and insults Thou hast borne for me.  
O most merciful Redeemer, friend and brother,  
May I know Thee more clearly,  
Love Thee more dearly,  
Follow Thee more nearly,  
Day by day. Amen.

Richard is said to have recited the prayer on his deathbed on 3rd April, 1253, surrounded by the clergy of his Diocese. It deserves its popularity, with beauty and simplicity expressing the call of the Christian, to praise God in thanksgiving, especially for the passion of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to seek to love God as we see Him in Jesus, and to follow his example. Credit should also be given to the translators of the prayer from the written Latin to English, producing the memorable and rhythmic version we know today. It is a powerful and intimate prayer, spoken directly to Jesus himself, who, despite our sins and failings is pleased to be called our Friend and Brother. Let's make the prayer our own today.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

The massive pyracantha bush we inherited here provides good garden screening, and shelter for a host of birds, but can literally be a pain. I have learnt only to prune it when I am at my fittest mentally and physically, dressing for it as for a space walk, and after drumming into myself a list of safety checks worthy of a self-help therapy course: 'Make trebly sure the ladder is not going to move and project you in the middle of the thorns; remember what happens to your back when you reach too high, etc. etc.' I actually sought medical advice last year after a wild west cactus sized thorn sliced through my gardening glove and embedded itself beyond radar distance in my finger. But this week it is forgiven; it has proved itself worth all the agony. It has flowered: a great splurge of dazzling creamy white; a living testimony to the love of God in giving us a world of indescribable beauty. People who know that God loves them have the secret of life. When the pain comes, they know that it is worth it, because life is such a beautiful gift from such a loving God.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

## **Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

I got myself a Pevsner guide to historic buildings to help me produce my pilgrimage. Today in one the three villages I walked through, it directed me to a beautiful 200-year-old house built with chequered red and blue bricks, and cobbles in a herringbone pattern, with a delightful English Cottage style garden: full of lupins, old roses and other perennials. The whole village in today's sunlight wrapped me in a sense of the secure charm of English village life that I grew up with: tall hedgerows and lazy rambling cottages and gardens, with the background symphony of joyous birdsong. It was idyllic. God loves us, something I often tell the many folk I have conversations with on my walks. People ask me why it is not always idyllic, why black suffering dogs so many for much of their lives. No doubt in even the most

idyllic villages suffering, pain, and wrong are lurking behind shutters. But would they be idyllic without the black times? Gold threads show up so well against the black, and sometimes in the harshest conditions of life, we see the gold of love, care, gentleness, forgiveness, loyalty, and goodness at their best.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Saturday 13<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Yesterday when I poured my tea from the pot into the milk in the mug, those nasty tell-tale fluffy bits floated up. Milk distinctly off. Irritation flared up, especially as it would delay me getting back to my amusing book. But a thought dammed the flow of my grumpiness immediately. I can simply reach in the fridge for milk other people have farmed, prepared, bottled, and delivered to the local shop for me. I am so privileged; I have no right to complain about anything. It reminded me of a few years back, living somewhere else. Through an administrative mistake, I had to wait three hours in an outpatients' department (for nothing serious). When it was at last my turn to be seen the medical staff were falling over themselves with apologies. 'Don't apologise,' I said, 'If I lived in Africa, it might not be three hours, but a three day walk to a hospital, and I might not go because I couldn't afford it.'

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Friday 12<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Today is the feast of St Barnabas, a Cypriot called Levi but renamed Barnabas by the Apostles meaning 'Son of Encouragement', a key member of the first Jerusalem church. He sold a field and gave the money to the Apostles for the poor, thereby encouraging the poor, and others to do the same. When Saul, who had persecuted the church, was converted, the Apostles were afraid of him, but Barnabas arranged a meeting and encouraged the Apostles to accept him. Barnabas was later sent to encourage new converts at Antioch and encouraged Paul (as he then was) to work with him there. This is beginning of Paul's missionary journeys, because it is from Antioch that Paul was sent out with Barnabas as his companion. Barnabas and Paul were sent to visit the Gentile churches to encourage them that they did need to keep the whole of the law of Moses. Sadly, their relationship ended when Paul refused to take Mark on their next journey because he had left halfway through the first, but Barnabas encouraged Mark by taking him to revisit Cyprus instead. It is possible that Barnabas was martyred there: our great example of the gift of encouragement.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Thursday 11<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

A decent spell of rain at last!

'He sends the snow in winter,  
The warmth to swell the grain,  
The breezes and the sunshine,  
And soft refreshing rain.

'All good gifts around us  
Are sent from heaven above

Then thank the Lord, O thank the Lord  
For all His Love.'

Gratitude is the key to life. Like love, it changes everything. Gratitude is healing. It lifts our wintered spirits and transforms relationship. Spend your life thanking God and other people and you and they will change. Living near the coast, one might want to change the hymn verse to 'The gales and the sunshine, and blinding, stinging rain,' but the truth of gratitude still holds good. The secret is to learn to thank God for the bad as well as the good. 'Give thanks in ALL circumstances' wrote St Paul, and some would say, 'FOR all circumstances. That is spiritual maturity. That is peace.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

I'm usually no good for anything in the morning till I've had fresh air and exercise, and one morning recently I felt like a caged lion. I looked outside. Hail! Ugh! No way I'm going for a walk! But something made me. When I got home, I had prayed with two separate people and shared faith with two more. Clearly, the Lord had kicked me outside. I wish I was better at listening to Him. For me, one of the most inspiring saints is Aidan, Founder Abbot of the Lindisfarne monastery, whose monks brought the Christian faith back to the North of England in the 7th century. Aidan insisted on walking everywhere so he could be with people on their level and share his faith. On meeting people, he asked if they were Christians. If they said Yes, he prayed with and encouraged them. If No, he asked why not, and often led them to faith. Nowadays I am often delayed on walks by people happy to talk about faith. I wish I was as good at it as Aidan, because there's an increasing hunger for faith in our country, and people need us to share our faith with them.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Tuesday 9<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

I've been walking a lot recently, working on the Pilgrimage I'm planning. It reminded me of the Latin phrase: 'Solvitur ambulando': 'It is solved by walking.' In all situations, people have found this to be true. The Aborigines are famous for their walkabouts. They walk for miles and for days in the wilds of the outback. They have the knowledge and ability to live off the land entirely alone. They don't need tents, rucksacks and hiking boots. We might not be so capable, but taking a walk will often clear our heads and help solve a problem. Walking is healing, too. I heard on the radio a man describing his lifelong severe clinical depression. He had received every one of the variety of medical treatments available. 'And they all helped me in some way,' he said, 'but I've come to the conclusion that what helped most was going for a walk.' I thank the Lord I don't suffer from severe depression, but like most of us I sometimes feel down, and I have learnt to make myself go for a walk. It never fails to lift me. Thank God for walking; pray for those who can't.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Monday 8<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

Today the church remembers Thomas Ken, 1637 - 1711. As prebendary of Winchester, he wrote hymns for the boys at the college. When Charles II visited the town, he refused lodging to Nell Gwyn because she was the king's mistress, but later the King rewarded his moral

courage by making him Bishop of Winchester. When James II was trying to push the country back to Catholicism, Thomas Ken resisted his illegal measures and was imprisoned in the Tower. But when James was deposed, he refused to swear allegiance to his successors on the grounds that his oath of allegiance to James still stood, and he lost his bishopric as a result. Thomas Ken was more, though, than a mere honest radical troublemaker. He was a deeply spiritual man, as his hymns show: Awake my soul and with sun and Glory to thee my God this night, with their wonderful doxology:

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow;  
praise him, all creatures here below;  
praise him above, ye heavenly host:  
praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost

If you've time, why not check out the hymns and sing them: they will lift your soul.

Stay safe,  
Every blessing

### **Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> June 2020**

It is Trinity Sunday. When I was training for ordination, my college put me on placement at a small mining village church, where I led a mid-week Bible Study. A member said, 'I don't think I'll ever understand the Trinity.' I had a chance to show off my newly acquired theological knowledge and teaching skills, so for five or ten minutes I expounded on what I thought was a brilliant explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity, as lucid as the clearest crystal. She thought for a few moments and then said, 'I don't think I'll ever understand the Trinity.' I learnt a lot that evening, especially about humility! If she asked me now I would say, Don't try to understand the Trinity, but instead devote your time to knowing and loving the Trinity: and in this one true God you will meet the creative Father God so humble that he is on your side and so is 'God for you'; the Son of God so humble that he became like you, died for you and rose again so that he is always 'God with you'; and the Spirit of God so humble he is a bit of 'God in you'

... may God bless you and keep you safe