**FOR INTERNATIONAL CHURCH LINKS DAY | 04.07.21**

**Deuteronomy 8: 1-3, 6-9a; Philippians 1: 3-11; St John 15: 9-17**

**Well now, there’s a thing! Fr John, over there is London, chooses Independence Day as a suitable occasion for what he calls *International Church Links Day!* Doesn’t he realise we have other things on our minds? Well, as Ed Carrette has hinted, it is probably the product of that rather strange animal: Brit humour!**

**So here I stand, in St James’, lslington in London, simply delighted to be given this opportunity of sharing July 4th with you, and the chance to explain a little of what I hope this occasion might mean. And what I would like to do, if I may, is to misappropriate your big Independence theme and add just three letters to it, at least for this year when the day falls on a Sunday: my word is less independence than in-ter-dependence.**

**Whatever else the Christian tradition is about, it is about stories. Many of you will know the tale of how Suzanne and Travis came across to London in the summer of 2018 in advance of Suzanne’s ordination as a deacon; how they ended up in St James’ Islington when they were looking for a Church to say Evening Prayer in that Thursday night. And how that chance meeting developed into my flying over to Grace for her priesting in January 2019, getting to know not only the wider Church community but the Smith family and the local geography too. And that has grown hugely since technology has made it possible for us here to share in your Noon Day Prayers on Wednesdays – which of course is 6pm for us. So we have got to know the regulars - like Mother Nan, very kindly preaching the sermon for us at St James’ today, Mother Suzanne, Stephanie, John, Ed, Chris, Margaret and all the others who dip in and out of that service.**

**But why would we bother? What is the value beyond the fact that we can do it?**

**Father’s Day here in the UK was on June 20th (I think it is the same for you) and for a present my older daughter Sinead bought me ‘Great Circle’ by the American author Maggie Shipstead. I had never read her work before but she is a New York Times best seller and the book – about the pre-war women pilot Marian Graves - is absolutely gripping. Just this morning as I sat in the garden over a very early cup of coffee I was taken back to Gastown in Vancouver which I visited a few years back, and backwards and forwards to heaps of other places I had never even heard of. All those worlds opened up through the novel as, page by page, I was able to share the experiences of all these pioneer aviators, their families and friends, to learn about boot-leggers and life in a remote shack in Missoula, Montana.**

**And that same thirst in no less powerful as we read of what the Church is up to! St Paul, writing to the Philippians (1: 3-11), says: *As God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best…***

**And that is the key to this link for me. Here we are, as Episcopalians and Anglicans in the first quarter of the 21st century. We have a common heritage, a common prayer book (ish!) and a common approach to scripture, reason and tradition. So what are we doing with that great deposit of faith as the Ordinal has it? In our different contexts, how does it play out? What is God doing with us? What are the pinch points and what are the joys that make it all possible?**

**So it is that I watch with delight as I see Ed and others filming the Food Pantry at Grace and we celebrate with you the painting of the great mural. And not to leave them out, I read with great interest the reflections of our other link partners, Fr Sebastian and Yuki Naniwa, working in a very tough environment, at St Andrew’s Church in Matsuyama in the Diocese of Kobe in Japan where the Christian population is absolutely tiny and the legacy of the past weighs very heavily on Sebastian’s young shoulders as he tries to mould his tiny community. The connection: Yuki is a fine organist and played at St James’ when she was student in London.**

**If we Christians are great story tellers, then we are also great travellers – sometimes physically as in the missionary journeys of St Paul or when I was able to be at Grace but also spiritually and mentally. And it is often in the contrasts that we learn, as with Maggie Shipstead’s book, to wrestle with the challenges that the Gospel poses.**

**One of the challenges of ministry here in Islington is the constant fact that we are set in a shifting and very young, population. No sooner have you got to know someone and they are off again to somewhere else. One of our families is soon off to Singapore: they only arrived last year! So the task here is to do all we can to make people welcome, open doors, share experiences and insights – and then let them go again, hopefully re-energised in their Christian faith, but also willing to start all over again in whatever Church they find themselves.**

**The other challenge was a head-line in the Church newspaper this morning. Apparently the aim of the Church growth specialists is to grow 10,000 new lay-led churches in this country over the next ten years.**

**When we have had a milli-second to absorb that – the next question is: but what kind of churches will they be? Will they be churches as we know them, or bible study groups, or just collections of friends? How will they celebrate the Eucharist? Will that matter in quite the same way? Will clergy be ‘air-lifted’ in like priests in the Amazon or in parts of East Africa, on an occasional basis? Will we return to the tent-maker model of St Paul or the French worker-priest model where blue collar factory workers were ordained because they had the ability to relate to those they worked alongside? Will we need bishops and cathedrals and what will happen to the cultural traditions that we treasure as Anglicans/Episcopalians. Here in London, the issue increasingly is: can we only have a priest if we can afford to pay them – not a concept we have ever fully faced before?**

**The teaching in Deuteronomy (8: 1-3, 6-9a) is a wonderful antidote to the banishment from the Garden of Eden that I referred to in last week’s sermon. Here we read: *Therefore keep the commandments of the Lord your God, by walking in his ways and by fearing him. For he is bringing you to a good land, a land with flowing streams, with springs and underground waters welling up in valleys and hills, a land where you will eat bread without scarcity, where you will lack nothing…***

**The fact is that all of us - in Islington, Alvin and Matsuyama – face the same 21st century trends. These are not easy days. And yet we hold on to the same promises that Deuteronomy lays before us. It is there in St John too (15: 9-17) when Jesus says, *for see, I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.***

**The question always is: how? How are we to inherit the good land? Ed tells me that one of the mantras of Mother Suzanne’s is about the need to be like plasticine, to take risks and to be experimental. I am glad to say that is very much our style here too … and each of us have to endure the pain and the vulnerability that such risks entail.**

**Which is why I am so keen that these international Church links should grow and mature. We need to learn from one another, to support one another when the going is tough, to share insights and knowledge borne of endurance and seeking after new possibilities.**

**This isn’t just ‘pleasant’ (though it is that!); it is what it means to be part of the one catholic and apostolic Church, committed – not to independence because independence removes the shackles of restraint and growth – but to inter-dependence – the place of safety where, from our own place and in our own time, *our love overflows more and more with knowledge and full insight to help us to determine what is best.* As one of our psalm prayers says: *Freed from* o*ur isolation, O Lord, may we find in one another new love and new hope.***