

LIVING AS A
CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITY

A SABBATICAL REPORT

BY

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INTRODUCTION

The theme for this, my first sabbatical, began to develop when a friend lent me the book 'Jesus for President'¹. I read the book with increasing interest and its thoughts and ideas lingered in my mind as I took up my new post as Minister of St Andrew's United Reformed Church, Scarborough in February 2009. This new pastorate was significantly different from my first pastorate at Christ Church Morecambe. It had a very different style of worship and a much older congregation and yet this Church had an enthusiasm that I found irresistible. A small core of people within St Andrew's had a desire to make a difference to Scarborough and to the wider world. The story of God's people, as retold in 'Jesus for President', seemed to speak directly to the possibilities of this congregation and I found that I was beginning to talk about this Church as a faith community and I did so because I believed that, as such, it had something special to offer. In conversation with members of the Church I found that they too were speaking about community and so I decided that I would use my sabbatical to explore and reflect on what it means to be a distinctively Christian

¹ Shane Claiborne & Chris Haw, Zondervan, 2008

community. To this end I knew that I wanted to live in community, to feel it and to share it and not just to read about it. So I sought to devise a plan that would enable me to spend my sabbatical living as a member of other Christian communities and I wanted those communities to be as different from each other as possible so as to experience as wide an expression of Christian community as I possibly could.

The first community I shared in was The First Congregational Church of St Charles, a United Church of Christ, North West of Chicago, Illinois in the United States of America. This Church had a membership of over 1,000 and an impressive desire to live out the Gospel in social action. I spent a month living and working as part of this community. From St Charles I moved on to spend time in a small contemplative monastic community in Worcester. For four days I lived in silence and in the stillness I received physical and spiritual renewal. Finally, I journeyed to Rome and to The Beda College, a community of formation for those preparing to take Holy Orders in the Roman Catholic Church. For two weeks I shared in the life of this College, attending lectures, worshipping and sharing stories of faith with those who look to the same Lord but express their faith in a way that is different to mine and the traditions to which I adhere. Whilst living in these communities I re-read 'Jesus for President'.

It is my intention in this report to reflect firstly on the themes of the book, 'Jesus for President', a book that had such an impact on my thinking, then to tell, and reflect on, the story of my experiences in the three communities in which I shared and then to seek to draw some conclusions from those experiences, conclusions that I know will only scratch the surface of this topic but which, I hope, will help to shape my ministry at St Andrew's and beyond.

'JESUS FOR PRESIDENT'

This book is written by American authors in order to address an American context. It seeks to re-tell the story of God's chosen people from the call of Abraham to the great power and influence exercised by Christendom and does so in order to ask where that story might go in the future. It seeks to do this because "what we need is an exploration of the Bible's political imagination, a renovated Christian politics, a new set of hopes, goals and practices." The main aim of the book is to issue a call for the Church to be a community that lives and proclaims the politics of God and therefore it often moves in a direction beyond that which I wanted to follow but in so doing it says much about what makes a Christian community so distinctive.

The story begins with the call of Abram and Sarai and "it is no coincidence that what is written immediately after the scattering at Babel is the calling of Abram and Sarai (Genesis 12). Homeless, small and powerless, they were the

antitheses of the Babel project. God called them out of their babbling confusion to become a peculiar new people whom God entrusted to bless the world. God set them apart with a new law, a new culture, a new destiny that was nothing short of the redemption of the human race". This story is our story; in it we find our calling both as individuals and as members of the Church. From Abraham and Sarah a nation came forth, a people set apart, a people who were not called to live as other nations (Numbers 23.9). These people were to have power in weakness and as if to endorse this point the Hebrew Scriptures reveal, again and again, how God chose the most unlikely characters to participate in God's great story of human liberation, people like Rahab, Moses, Ruth and David. This is "the great paradox and humor of God's audacious power: a stuttering prophet will be the voice of God, a barren old lady will become the mother of a nation, a shepherd boy will become their king and a homeless baby will lead them home." Through trial and temptation, fall and restoration the story is told of a nation that bears witness to God's faithfulness and love and in time that nation was called to account through the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the Word made flesh. "Jesus was urging his followers to be the unique, peculiar and set-apart people that began with Abraham. He didn't pray for the world in order to make governments more religious; he called Israel to be the light of the world - to abandon the way of the world and cultivate an alternative society in the shell of the old, not merely a better version of the kingdom of this world." Jesus began his ministry in his home town of Nazareth where he stood up in the Synagogue

and read aloud the powerful words from the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah (Luke 4.16-21). From the start he aligned his ministry with God's ancient and on-going story and set forth his intention to establish an alternative community, as God had intended, that was grounded in sharing, liberation and mutual aid. Jesus set about creating a community that was subversive, one that would challenge the structures of the world through the infectious Good News of the Gospel. This is the life that Jesus lived and he called others to live this life with him and then he challenged them to go out and call others to share this life with them. "Making disciples meant that they were teaching the world to do the things Jesus did. To wash feet. To proclaim jubilee. To love enemies. To welcome strangers. And they would become known as the Way. Their community was more than just a group of people who shared religious beliefs. They were a group that embodied a new way of living, the way out of the empire, where slavery, poverty, war and oppression were normal. They were to become the salt and the light of the world. The credibility of their gospel would rest on the integrity of their lives. For they were now to be the body of Christ. Jesus would live in them." This is the high calling of the community that God created and that Jesus moulded and it has continued throughout the centuries, although along the way it has been corrupted by the allure of power and prestige. Drawn into relationship with the Roman Empire through the conversion of the Emperor Constantine it became an agency of Empire and used its new found power to subvert and control. This community has justified

unspeakable acts of terror and abused the message with which it has been entrusted. "But throughout the ages, beautiful saints have lived faithfully, giving hope that a set-apart people can fascinate and bless the world." The book concludes: "much of the world now lies in the ruins of triumphant and militant Christianity. The imperially baptized religion created a domesticated version of Christianity - a dangerous thing that can inoculate people from ever experiencing true faith. (Everyone is a Christian, but no one knows what a Christian is anymore)."

The authors final thoughts are that the Church now needs to get in touch with her true calling and to break free from the oppression of her past involvement with the kingdoms of the world. The community that seeks to live as Jesus lived now needs new celebrations; new language; new rituals; new heroes; new songs; new liturgy; new eyes and new holidays all of which will celebrate the story of God's politics, God's liberation and God's love. The community of Jesus does have a message that will fascinate and attract the world. The community of Jesus is, by its very nature, a very different expression of community with values very distinct from the world. This community is the community that I feel called to live in, a community that I seek to serve with my every thought, word and deed. So, inspired by this book I embarked upon my sabbatical to see if I could find this community in practice.

St. CHARLES, ILLINIOS

On Wednesday 6th October 2010 I left Manchester Airport bound for Chicago, Illinios in order to share in the life, work and witness of The First Congregational Church of St Charles. Up until this date my only connection with this Church had been through their Senior Pastor, John Rodgers, who I had met in 2007 when he came to Morecambe through an exchange with my colleague, The Reverend Helga Cornell. John and I had got on very well and at the end of his visit to England he invited me to visit him in Chicago, an invitation that I had let slip until my sabbatical was due. Now that this experience lies behind me it is hard to recall quite what I expected the month's visit to involve and I guess that if I am being honest it was pretty vague!

When I arrived the first thing that struck me was how big everything seemed to be: the roads, the houses and most definitely the church! Despite having flown

for over seven hours and not being sure what time of day it was my induction began on that first evening with two meetings. I cannot recall what was discussed, although I know that one was about Worship and the other Mission, but I can remember how impressed I was by the 'lay' involvement. In the United Reformed Church we talk a great deal about lay leadership but here in my first exposure to this community I saw it in action. I was amazed at the role that John played, so very clearly one member of a larger team, contributing his own gifts but never dominating the discussion.

Unlike my own denomination the faith community of St Charles owned the building in which they worshipped and served and I felt that that ownership went beyond the bricks and mortar and into the questions of theology, worship and mission.

Three days after I arrived I embarked on what was to become a truly significant journey. I joined a party of about twenty church members on their annual mission trip to Biloxi, Mississippi. Biloxi is situated on the coast of the Gulf of Mexico; East of New Orleans and in 2005 was devastated by Hurricane Katrina. Most of our party was flying down but I was travelling by road, joining Jim and Wyonne Hegland in the Church minibus that was transporting the luggage! I could hardly believe that we were going to travel for sixteen hours in a bus that didn't have air conditioning but we did and the experience taught me that there is much you can learn whilst on the journey, regardless of the destination.

There were five of us making the journey, three in the bus and two in a truck

and during those sixteen hours my travelling companions showed such kindness, care and generosity and a friendship was formed that day with Jim and Wyonne that is built to last. Whilst the journey was good the destination proved to be amazing. Just after 2pm on Sunday 10th October we arrived at Back Bay Mission, the only presence of the United Church of Christ in the State of Mississippi. On reflection I have come to think that if this is all that people in the South see of the United Church of Christ then they are seeing the very best that a Church can offer. Back Bay Mission is a place of service to the wider community, a place where practical work is done in the Lord's name and that service is seen as a witness to the love of God and a proclamation of the Good News of the Gospel. It is also a place where people live in community, a close-knit community. For a week we slept in dormitories, we prepared and ate food together, we cleaned together, we worked together and we prayed together. I feel very privileged to have shared in that Mission Week, working alongside so many great people who freely offered their time and their skills to God's service and to the service of their fellow human beings. We shared unforgettable stories and I discovered new skills, many of which I didn't even realise I had! I still find it hard to think that I was up a ladder painting the side of a house when at home I have never painted a thing! I was moved by the stories of those who survived Hurricane Katrina and inspired by the hope and courage that enables them to build new lives. I was captivated by the excitement of New Orleans, which I enjoyed on an afternoon off, but above all I

enjoyed living as a member of that Mission Team for that one week. The sense of comradeship that bound us together, the sharing of tasks, the mutual encouragement and the awareness of the greater calling, which had drawn us all there, expressed for me the very best in what it means to be a Christian community. When the week was over I felt very sad to be parting from that group even though I knew I would see most of them in Church the very next day! The long journey home was broken by a surprise visit to 'Gracelands', the home of Elvis Presley; a real treat for me and a thoughtful gesture from my travelling companions who had clearly listened to the things I had told them in conversation!

On my return to St Charles my participation in the regular pattern of the Church's life began in earnest. As our first morning back was Sunday 17th October it is not surprising that it began with worship and this gave me a chance to get to know a greater number of the congregation. Like the committee meetings on my first day it was clear that the congregation also felt an ownership of their communal worship and the service involved many participants. That evening I began the first of many informal dinners with members of the congregation which allowed me a better chance to engage in discussions about the life of the church and, as it turned out, the life of the nation and especially the role of the President, Barack Obama, hero to many and villain to a few! I valued these meals very much as I was able to sit at table with relative strangers and feel that in a mysterious and yet powerful way I was

sitting with brothers and sisters, who despite differences in age, politics and culture, shared through faith, a common aim and a common purpose. These meals were times when stories were told and much was learnt and shared.

On Monday 18th October I was introduced to what many had described as a real highlight of the Church's life - the Women's Fellowship's Rummage Sale! This was due to start at 4pm on Wednesday 20th and they needed three days to set up. I was a little sceptical about all that I had heard about this event but I was soon shown the error of my thinking when 'stuff' started to arrive by the car load. Soon the hall was filled with rummage of every shape and size and my ability to cart said 'stuff' from car to hall was proving to be very useful. I think that I learnt more about the Church from the conversations that I had during these few days than at any other event during the whole of my visit! Those who were involved in this event saw it as an important expression of their Christian witness; they spoke of the fellowship that they felt when preparing for the sale; they spoke of the care that they offered to people who came in and were clearly in need and they spoke of the thought that went into the way they distributed the 'stuff' that they didn't sell so as to ensure that it helped other causes in their community.

As I settled into the life of this Church I developed a pattern that shaped my days and enabled me to structure my thoughts and my experiences and drew me more deeply into the pattern of community. I began to share in the regular

events that occur in the life of a church and this started to ground me in this particular community and I began to feel that I was a part of it. I participated in the regular activities of Bible Study and Book Study and began to share in conversations about theology and belief. The Bible Study looked at the women of the Bible and asked: Are they uppity? The sessions were led by members of the congregation following a set course and produced lively and challenging discussions. The Book Group looked at 'Tell it like it is'². This book sought to reclaim the practice of testimony and touched on the importance of Christians sharing their stories of faith and their encounters with the Living God. I joined the men for their breakfast meetings and the clergy for theirs and I joined the Church on their outing to Springfield, the State Capital of Illinois and the home of the Abraham Lincoln Museum and Presidential Library. This day brought Lincoln's story alive and showed me, once again, the value of, and the entertainment that can be had on, the journey. As my visit drew to a close I shared in the Church's Memorial Sunday. John preached an exceptionally powerful sermon reflecting on the Church's attitude to death. He acknowledged the pain of death but set it in the context of the power of the cross. After the sermon the names of those who had died in the past year were read out and a bell tolled for each one: it was dignified and deeply moving. Memorial Sunday fell on 31st October, which also enabled me to experience the culturally important festival of Hallowe'en! I shared the evening with a wonderful family and thoroughly enjoyed the sight of 20-30 children being carted around the

² Lillian Daniel, The Albany Institute, 2006

neighbourhood in a farm truck and at every street leaping off and scattering in every direction to gather candy from their neighbours. Later, over chili and wine, I enjoyed sharing conversations with people I felt I had much in common with and I would have liked to have had time to have known better but time was running out both the hours of that night and the days of my trip.

Whilst I was beginning to feel so much a part of this community I also knew that soon it would be time to leave and friendships which begin with a spark need nurturing with time and effort if they are to grow and so on this evening I realised that sometimes we must enjoy what comes, thank God for the moment and then journey on.

On Wednesday 3rd November I was back at Chicago O'Hare Airport ready to return home. When I first landed and knew that a month lay ahead of me it seemed such a long time but now as I waited to board the plane it seemed all too short. There was much that I wanted to be part of in the weeks that lay ahead and there were people that I wanted to share with. But in every journey there comes a time to part from those we travel with and that time had come on this my American journey. In conclusion I would like to say something about John and Susan Rodgers who made this experience possible and who welcomed me into their home and made me feel at home. As I waited to board the plane at Manchester Airport on 6th October I knew that whatever else might happen it would be good to see them again and I was right. It was good to meet them again but from that moment we began a journey that has led to a much deeper

relationship and one that I will always value. Together they showed me their world and that too taught me much about Christian community.

I could write for a lot longer reflecting on this visit but it is impossible to capture it all on paper! We hear much talk in Britain about the special relationship that we have with the United States of America and I have never really been sure that it is all that special as we are but one nation amongst many that the American Government needs to relate to. What is special is the bond that unites people when they come together in faith and as I journey on I will always consider the First Congregational Church of St Charles a special community. They welcomed me in and for one month in 2010 they shared their life with me and it has made a lasting impression on me and it will shape how I minister as I move in to the future. That single month proved to be a real opportunity to learn and I had the most amazing time!

GLASSHAMPTON MONASTERY

On Tuesday 9th November, after a few days spent in the company of my young Godchildren and their parents, I set off on the second stage of my sabbatical: a four day silent retreat. The journey to Worcester was smooth but actually finding the Monastery proved to be a little more challenging although finally, as the darkness gathered in, I turned up a dirt track and found my way to the house. The monastery is situated at the top of a hill surrounded by woods and fields and as soon as I arrived I felt that it was a place of peace, stillness and contemplation. The Internet had enabled me to gain an insight into something of the house's history: "For more than 80 years this has been a house of prayer. Originally the house itself was a stable block to a much larger mansion now buried under the surrounding fields. The stables were built in 1810 but soon after the house burned down and was never repaired. In the early years of the twentieth century, Father William Sirr of the Society of Divine Compassion felt called by God to leave his work in the East End of London to begin a contemplative life of prayer in a more secluded setting. In the winter of 1918 he moved to Glasshampton and established the monastic life that continues to this day. Fr. William lived here for nearly 20 years, and renovated the building to

make it habitable again. People came to stay for shorter or longer periods of time, finding in Fr. William a spiritual director of great holiness. But the life was too hard for most people - with cold winters, poor food and long hours of prayer each morning - and he was unable to form a new community. In 1947 the Society of Saint Francis was invited to send friars (brothers) to live at Glasshampton. From that time onwards the monastery has continued as a place where the chapel bell calls people to sing God's praise, and where guests are welcomed to renew their own relationship with God. We who live here at Glasshampton belong to the Society of Saint Francis, an Anglican community following a call to the service of God in the spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi. We commit ourselves to God by taking the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Poverty does not mean that we have nothing at all, but rather that we try to live in simplicity of life and openness of heart, sharing both material and spiritual gifts in detachment and without personal ownership. Chastity means that we commit ourselves wholly to God, living in celibacy and not marrying, seeking to devote all our energy to our relationship with Christ. Obedience means that we try to follow the will of God, being prepared to give up our own will when necessary, seeking the common good in community life. Although both men and women belong to our Order, the sisters and brothers usually live in separate houses, and Glasshampton is one of the houses where the brothers live."

I entered this house, following in the footsteps of countless others who had come to find stillness and solitude. My American experiences were buzzing around my head, thoughts of my ten years of ministry were now seeking reflection and I had a deep desire to be still in the presence of God.

My room was simple and within an hour I was in the Chapel for Evening Prayer and beginning to settle into the pattern of prayer that shapes this community's life. The following day I embraced that pattern fully. At 7am the day begins with Morning Prayer, this continues until 8am when The Eucharist is celebrated. Breakfast follows, which, like all meals, is taken in silence and then the morning is your own. Midday Prayer is followed by lunch and then the afternoon, like the morning, is your own, with the option of joining the Brothers for Afternoon Tea at 4pm where conversation is allowed! Evening Prayer is at 5:30pm and Supper at 7pm. The day ends at 9pm with Compline. As the days passed this rhythm shaped both my actions and my thoughts and God both challenged and comforted me in times of worship and in times of stillness.

When I retired at night I reflected on how full my days had seemed and yet how peacefully they had passed. With the busyness of life set aside the thoughts that every-day life requires dropped away and the deeper concerns that are all too often pushed to the back of my mind came to the fore and I discovered that when I addressed them and laid before God they were not the burdens that I had believed them to be. There was rest in the silence and there was closure, there was peace and there was strength. I was able to read, to pray, to write and to

see my journey in a new light, to let go of past mistakes and to embrace new challenges. With refreshment came liberation and the possibility of a new life! The days spent in stillness had been more powerful than I had ever imagined they could be and they gave me a great sense of purpose as I left the monastery and headed to stay with friends for the weekend. Within a few hours I was stuck on the M25 amidst the Friday night traffic, the usual pressures of life crowding in on me once more but something had changed, a weight had been lifted and I had felt the call to a new life. I now began a two week tour along the South Coast of England visiting friends and renewing friendships that had for some years been neglected before finally returning to Manchester where I would embark on the final leg of my sabbatical.

THE BEDA COLLEGE, ROME

On Friday 26th November, I awoke to begin the final stage of my sabbatical but having to leave the house at 5am was just a little too early for my liking! My destination was Rome, the Eternal City, and the very heart of the world's largest Christian denomination, The Roman Catholic Church. Ever since I was a student at St Mary's College, Twickenham I have had a love for Catholic worship and the possibility of now immersing myself into the life of a city so dominated by the Church was a pure delight. However, the toll of travel was by now beginning to take effect and a part of me would have been happy to have stayed in just one place for a little longer but the journey called me on! My destination was The Beda College and as I flew over the snow-capped Alps I realised that all I knew about the College was what I had read on their website and so the next two weeks felt like stepping into the unknown! In 1852, Pope Pius IX approved a plan to accommodate in Rome a number of clergymen from England who had joined the Catholic Church from other Christian denominations and wished to prepare for the Catholic priesthood. The new College - first known as Collegio Ecclesiastico and later as Collegio Pio - also included lifelong Catholics, drawn to the priesthood fairly late in life. A third category comprised

younger, newly ordained priests studying for post-graduate degrees in Rome. For over 100 years this was to remain the typical composition of the student body, ensuring that the College would become the world's best-known College for "late vocations" - training men who had already followed widely differing careers. The College entered a period of renewal at the turn of the century when, as a result of the interest taken by Pope Leo XIII, a new constitution was issued in 1898. The Pope decided that the College should be placed under the patronage of the Venerable Bede, the eighth century author of The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, to whom the Pope had a personal devotion. In the following year he was to raise St Bede to the dignity of Doctor of the Church and the name "Pontificio Collegio Beda" originates from this time. The Beda developed its own system of priestly formation, based on a unique four-year course of studies conducted in English. This took shape in the 1930's and 1940's, while Monsignor Charles Duchemin was Rector. The College was evacuated to Britain in 1939 for the duration of the Second World War and by October 1947, the Beda had returned to its home at 67 Via di S. Nicolo da Tolentino, near the Piazza Barberini. But by the mid 1950's, with large numbers seeking admission, the College had outgrown its premises. In 1956 Pope Pius XII provided from Vatican property the land on which the present modern Beda stands, adjacent to the Basilica of St Paul Outside the Walls. Pope John XXIII formally opened the new building on 20 October 1960. The College continues on this site until the present day."

I arrived at the College and was made very welcome by the Rector, Monsignor Roderick Strange, but when I went down to lunch and joined the staff at their table I felt completely out of my depth and began to wonder whether I had made a mistake! It took me a few days to find my confidence as I felt like a very small fish in a very big pond but the members of staff were nothing but welcoming and the student body, on the whole, very friendly. Arriving at the start of the weekend meant that I had to wait until Monday to begin to experience the pattern of the community but once I did I began to enjoy my experience of Rome. That first weekend, however, provided some real highlights of my visit. On Saturday morning, Simon Grainger, a student who was to prove to be a most excellent tour guide, took me across the road to The Basilica of St Paul. In October I had thought how big things seemed in America but now I realised how right former American President Ronald Reagan was when he quipped 'you ain't seen nothing yet', albeit about himself, not churches! The Basilica was enormous and at such an early hour of the morning, with hardly any people and with no seating set out, it was empty. It was, however, peaceful, its walls undoubtedly soaked by the prayers of thousands of pilgrims for this Church contained the tomb of St Paul. Again and again during my stay I would visit the Basilica, drawn by both its size and its stillness and I never experienced anything quite like it in any of the other churches that dominate this incredible city. Later that day, with Simon leading the way, I headed off to St Peter's Basilica in the hope of being able to attend Advent Vespers led by His

Holiness Pope Benedict XVI. We queued with hope for Simon had been unable to get tickets and the queue stretched three quarters of the way around that famous square. Just as we neared the entrance and hope was starting to fade Simon managed to get two tickets from a nun who was a friend of a friend of his! I had been to St Peter's several times on my previous visits to Rome but always as a tourist but tonight I came to worship God and as the Basilica filled for this purpose the atmosphere was different and the vast building seemed more intimate. It was a beautiful service, delivered in a mixture of Latin and Italian, but so vivid was the spectacle of this act of worship that it transcended the restrictions of language and my soul soared with the music offered in praise of God. The presence of the Pope created quite a response and it was not one that I was at all comfortable with. As the Papal procession moved down the central aisle, the congregation crowded towards the barriers, climbing up on their chairs, pointing their cameras and mobile 'phones and crying out to the Holy Father. As we prepared for worship it seemed as though a 'superstar' had entered the building and I remembered that this man is the very head of the Roman Catholic Church. Later I reflected on what a contrast this provided to my experiences in St Charles' where the Church had been owned and governed by the whole congregation and I wondered which model best reflects the Christian community we are called to be?

On Monday 29th November, I began to follow the pattern that would shape the whole of my time at The Beda, I joined in the pattern of worship, a much

simpler routine than in the Monastery; Mass in the morning and Evening Prayer before dinner. In the morning I studied, both privately and through attending lectures with the students. In the afternoon's I visited the great sites of Rome and in the evenings I tried, where possible, to spend time with the students. On this first full day I finished re-reading 'Jesus for President' and was deeply unsettled by it. The book spoke about Christ's community as being one that lives on the margins of society, which seeks to subvert the world with the Good News of the Gospel, that seeks to live simply and serve humbly and here I was in a city dominated by the Church but dominated by it in such a worldly way. The great churches spoke to me not of humility but of power and an imperial power at that! These buildings were beautiful but they displayed all the trappings of power and privilege. Now the question of what makes a Christian community truly distinctive began to press upon me. On Tuesday 30th November I enjoyed lectures on Job with the second years and the formation of the Bible with the first years. I was amused by the expressions on the faces of the ordinands in the latter class, hearing perhaps for the first time some new perspectives on Holy Scripture and I can well remember being there myself when I began my studies at St Mary's in 1991! That evening I attended Mass at San Andrea della Valle, a solemn Mass for St Andrew's Day. It was a beautiful liturgy but with a congregation that came and went which I found fascinating, if a little distracting. At this service my thoughts turned, not unsurprisingly, to my own congregation so different from what I was experiencing in Rome and yet,

at its heart, sharing the same focus and common purpose as the Roman Catholic Church. Two days later Simon took me to Evensong at one of Rome's Anglican churches. It felt strange following a liturgy that I am so familiar with and which is so associated with England, in the heart of a city, far from home and dominated by one Church. The service was followed by a concert given by a school choir travelling from Australia. It was a fantastic evening, so good in fact that I went to their second concert the following night!

On Friday 3rd December I met with the Anglican Representative to the Holy See, Canon David Richardson, and spent a most stimulating hour and half talking with him about the relationship between the Anglican Communion and the Roman Catholic Church. He invited me to return to the Anglican Centre the following week to share in Eucharist and lunch. I took him up on his invitation and at that lunch met a priest who told me not to forget that Rome was not the Catholic Church! I knew this from my own experiences but it was good to be reminded that so many Catholic communities do seek to live simply and on the margins and on the evening of 3rd December I experienced such a community. That evening I had joined some of the First Year Students as they went and worked at a Soup Kitchen run by a Catholic lay organisation and in the few hours that we were there an estimated 800 people were served an evening meal! As we were waiting to start a group of American Seminarians arrived immaculately dressed in clerical attire and the effect on the Beda students was fascinating. Though these Americans were much younger than the men I was

with they seemed to intimidate them and I could understand that as they made quite an impression when they arrived. I was not so intimidated and went over and spoke to them and found, not surprisingly, that, behind the uniforms, they were very pleasant. Sometimes barriers are formed that threaten cohesion and they are not always the barriers we expect but they can be overcome when we speak one to another. This was revealed in a small way whilst at the Soup Kitchen but I experienced it in a much deeper way during my whole visit to the Beda. There is still, from my tradition, much suspicion of The Roman Catholic Church and much misunderstanding and these two weeks gave me the opportunity to talk in depth about the different ways in which we seek to express our faith and I found, as I have often found, that once you start talking, there is more that unites us than divides us.

On Monday 6th December Simon took me to a Mass in which several nuns made their first vows as Sisters in the Order founded by Blessed Mother Theresa of Calcutta, the Missionaries of Charity. Here in the grandeur of this Eternal City, in a Church that was so ornate and beautiful a small group of women promised to live in poverty, to serve on the margins of society and to embrace the poorest of the poor with the love that comes from God. It was a powerful service combining what I considered to be a well-constructed liturgy with beautiful music and inspirational commitment. I had found an expression of what I was looking for! Two days later I went to the Church of Santa Maria Maggoire to share in the Mass celebrating The Feast of the Immaculate

Conception, The Feast Day of my alma mater, St Mary's College. This service was the most beautiful piece of liturgical theatre I have ever experienced. Set against the backdrop of this stunning Basilica with a cast of clergy, members of the diplomatic core and military personnel, with music provided by organ, trumpets and a choir, the worship soared from earth to heaven and lifted heads and hearts so that we were able to look to God. For two hours I was lifted out of the questions and challenges that played on my mind and I felt as though I belonged in this place, that I was at one with these people even though I was not for I could not share with them when the elements of bread and wine were distributed. I could not understand the language in which the service was delivered and I did not believe in the doctrine that was being celebrated and yet for all that I felt that, at this time and in this place, we were as one before God.

Two days later my visit was over and I made my farewells and took my leave from The Beda College. It had been a challenging two weeks, with more questions than answers but in it I had found fellow pilgrims with whom I was able to share my questions and perhaps friends that will go with me into the future. At my final Mass on Friday 10th December the Rector thanked me for coming and sharing with the College and I left with an invitation to return in 2012 as the Preacher at their service for The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity. Yes, for all that divides us I do believe there is so much more that unites us.

CONCLUSION

When my travelling was done it was time to relax for Christmas had arrived and I went to my parents' home to spend the holiday with my family who were gathered there. As is our custom we sat down at 3pm on Christmas Day to listen to Her Majesty the Queen's Christmas Broadcast. Using the celebrations marking the 400th Anniversary of the Authorised Version of the Bible as her foundation she reflected on the importance of building communities and encouraging harmony. She focused on team sports, the need for rules to abide by and the importance of co-operation between players for success. "People are capable of belonging to many communities including a religious faith. King James may not have anticipated quite how important sports and games were to become in promoting harmony and common interests but from the Scriptures in the Bible which bears his name we know that nothing is more satisfying than the feelings of belonging to a group who are dedicated to helping each other. "Therefore all things whatsoever you would that men should do to you do you even so to them." Her words spoke powerfully to me on that Christmas Day as I reflected on all that I had experienced and as I prepared to return to my own faith community and to my normal routine.

Community is formed wherever people gather around a common purpose and yet it is my belief that those who gather in the name of God and seek to walk in the footsteps of Christ Jesus form something special.

We are drawn into playing our part in an ancient story that continues to fascinate and challenge the world in which we live. We build on the foundations laid by those who were once known as The Way. "Before there was Christianity or Christendom or even really the Church, the movement of people following Jesus became known as The Way, because their way of living stood in stark contrast to the ways of empire. (Jesus for President, P.148).

"They were to become the salt and light of the world. The credibility of their gospel would rest on the integrity of their lives. For they were now to be the Body of Christ. Jesus would live in them." (Jesus for President, P.137). Despite her many centuries of corruption the Church continues to bear witness to this calling and many who live as the Church dedicate their lives to fulfilling it.

That is what I experienced in the three communities that I journeyed with during my sabbatical and this is what I heard in the conversations that I shared with my fellow pilgrims in each of those communities.

These insights are still being processed in my mind as I reflect on them and apply them to my subsequent experiences but they are already shaping my ministry and my understanding of who I am and how I play my part in the on-going story. Therefore, now that I come to write this conclusion to my

sabbatical report I find that I am unable to do so with any sense of cohesion or with any hope of offering firm conclusions. This work is most definitely an on-going project! What I offer in this conclusion are some of the ideas that have started to stand out as significant.

I felt that each of the three communities I shared in were places where people gathered to tell their stories against the wider framework of God's unfolding story. They were places of welcome, places where all voices could be heard and I even felt that to be true in the case of the silent monastery! To this end each community developed different groups where people could gather to explore their common purpose. People met for meals, bible study, book groups, lectures, and above all else for worship. In each community the drama of worship was both fed by and borne out through service. The groups allowed people to gather and share and in so doing relationships were developed and such relationships are the key to the whole community experience! Mrs Gail Mack, a member of the Church in St Charles, told me that even though she found the Church far too liberal she felt that the people were lovely and that was what really mattered! Community needs to be developed and that is done through relationships and those relationships need time, love and thought to be nurtured. Grounding oneself in a community, sharing its highs and lows, is so important and as my sabbatical unfolded that is what I really missed. This was especially true during Advent for this is a season that I have always valued and

worshipping in a different Church each week deprived me of that sense of journeying to the manger.

The Church's seasons structure her life and structure is an important part of understanding and sharing in a community for pattern gives order and a sense of belonging. In his book 'The Social Entrepreneur', which I also read whilst on sabbatical, Andrew Mawson reflects: "I had a sense that building up a sense of community in an area where so many were isolated would mean creating some kind of rhythm around which they could orientate themselves." (P.68). The first followers of Jesus created that rhythm around their sacred stories and we continue that practice in our own time, we tell stories of hope, of healing and of resurrection and transformation and we offer those stories to the world. We invite the world to come and share their stories too and we do that by providing a space where the welcome is warm and sincere, a place where it is safe to ask questions about who we are and how we relate to the world around us, and by a desire to go out from our space and serve others because they too are God's beloved children. Father James Leachman, a priest I met in Rome, told me that for community to work it needs boundaries, identity and openness to new members. I believe that at the core of the message that the Church proclaims through her doctrines and traditions are the values of welcome, space and service. These are offered not for certain people but for all people and it is this fundamental practice that I believe marks out the Church as an extraordinary community!

This statement has become the foundation on which I have now started to build and process all of my reflections on my sabbatical, some of which have found their way into this report and many which have not, and as I finish writing this report I know that I have only just begun to grapple with this subject!