Thought for the Day: 29 June – 5 July 2020

by Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

Introduction on Monday:
As I don't expect to get an exotic transcontinental holiday this summer, over the week I will share with you some of the picture postcards I might have sent from previous family trips to the USA.

Monday

A postcard from Monument Valley, Arizona

Monument Valley, the breath-taking backdrop to so many of the old Western movies, stands on the tribal lands of the Navajo nation. On a day-long tour of the 'backlot' (the vast area beyond the reach of the main tourist loop), our Navajo guide, Harris, shared with our sons the childhood games he had once played among the rocks, and played for us on his traditional flute. He also shared with us old Navajo stories and wisdom, including this:

The Navajo compass has not just four points, but seven. North, South, East and West identify with the four sacred mountains that mark the boundaries of their traditional lands (their current Reservation is much smaller). The fifth and sixth are above, and below. There is a reference here to time as well as space, and to their traditional religion. The Navajo, like many of the Native American nations, believe that their ancestors came into this world through a hole in the earth from a world below, and in due time will leave it through a hole in the sky for a world above.

Harris asked us to guess what the seventh point of the compass might be. Could you guess?

The seventh point is HERE. Where we are now. Not where we have been, not where we hope (or fear) we are going to, but where we are now. The point we so easily forget about. The point that matters most.

Tuesday

A postcard from Memphis, Tennessee

The picture is the Sun Records studio, where Elvis Presley, Ike Turner, Howlin' Wolf and Carl Perkins forged a new music that bridged the divide between black and white America. Rock 'n' roll.

As we drove into Memphis, we checked Google Maps and chose a convenient supermarket to stock up with food before we located our self-catering flat.

A big store, a full parking lot, busy with late afternoon shoppers. Only as we left did we notice that, of the hundreds of people we had seen there, we were the only whites.

To be fair, nobody had shown any surprise at our presence, we hadn't felt uncomfortable. But we realised we had been in a black part of town. Segregation was absolute. This was 2018.

We talked to the locals about this. They confirmed our observation. The legal forms of segregation in the Southern States have gone, but the two races often simply find it easier, and safer, to keep apart.

Malcolm X, who was Martin Luther King's most prominent rival/critic in the heady days of the Civil Rights movement, openly advocated segregation (though with real economic and social equality), arguing that the legacy of injustice and hatred between the black and white races could never be repented or forgiven. He saw King's message of justice with reconciliation as a betrayal.

Who was right? I fear that for very many Americans, the jury is still out on that one. Maybe, just maybe, the events of 2020 will prove that Malcolm X was wrong.

Wednesday
A Postcard from Little Bighorn, Montana

My generation grew up on a diet of Western movies, of heroic cowboys and cavalrymen fighting cruel and bloodthirsty 'Indians'. We didn't see the other side of the story, the land-grabbing miners and ranchers, broken treaties and brutal forced deportations.

We visited the battlefield of Little Bighorn, the site of Custer's Last Stand that is such a prominent part of America's frontier mythology. It now lies in Reservation lands, the memorial site is staffed by Native Americans and we enjoyed our properly 'contextualised' guided tour.

The imaginative monument to the Sioux and Cheyenne warriors who died 'defending their way of life' enjoys rightful prominence.

But when our guide spoke of his own ancestral connections to the battlefield, he led us to the modest panel that commemorated the Crow Indian soldiers who had fought alongside Custer's cavalry. They fought to recover their own tribal lands, overrun by the Sioux in the preceding 25 years. They live there to this day, though their subsequent relationship with 'white' America has not been easy.

A timely reminder that, whenever we dig deeper into history, there are always more sides to it than we expect.

Thursday

A postcard from Glacier National Park, Montana

The American National Parks have a refreshing attitude to Health and Safety. They explain the dangers, recommend precautions, and leave you to make your mind up. In the mountain and desert regions we love to explore, the dangers are real, and deadly - rattlesnakes, grizzly bears, heatstroke, precipices.

When we heard that our chosen hiking trail for the day's outing was closed, we asked why. "Bears on the trail", explained the Park Ranger. "They come down from the mountains in late August to feast on the Huckleberries in the valley. It's too dangerous right now".

"But we have bought all the precautions", we explained. Pepper spray, bells to warn the bears we are approaching (grizzly bears are only really dangerous if you surprise them, especially if they have young with them), bear-proof canisters for our food.

"We're not protecting you", the ranger replied. "If we let people go on the trail, the bears will feel threatened, they will go back up into the mountains and will not be able to eat the berries. They will go into their winter sleep undernourished, and they may not survive until spring." They are protecting the bears, from the most dangerous animals on earth - Humans.

(PS – this is our own photo, but we cheated. This was taken at a bear sanctuary. If you got that close to a grizzly in the wild, you would be her lunch!)

Friday

A postcard from Blackfoot Country (Montana and Alberta)

The photo is St Mary Lake, Glacier National Park. Traditionally this is the sacred land of the Blackfoot Nation. Their Rocky Mountain home straddles the US/Canadian border, but they don't take much notice of white men's frontiers.

When you encounter native Americans, there is often a moment of embarrassment when visitors ask what they like to be called. Tourists are rightly anxious to avoid causing offence.

Our host at the cultural centre was refreshingly candid. "You can call us Blackfoot, you can call us Indians." Then she added with a grin, "Just don't ask us what we call you in our language!" I wish I had done, but I didn't.

Why 'Blackfoot', we asked. "That's what our neighbouring tribes call us, the white men just translated it."

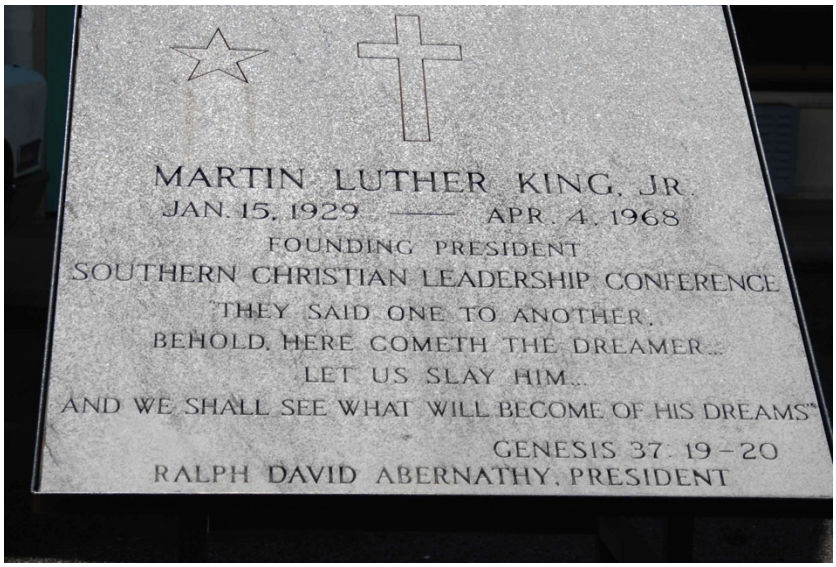
"So what do you call yourselves?" "Niitsitapi". "And what does that mean?" "It just means 'The people'".

The Navajo down in Arizona tell the same story. 'Navajo' was the name the Spanish gave them, adapting the name they heard their neighbours call them. The Navajo call themselves the Dine (pronounced Deenay). It also means, quite simply, 'the people'.

There's a moral here, isn't there. The labels we give each other differentiate and divide. But we do not have to let them define us. In truth we are all 'the people'. Peel away the labels, and we all have the same name. The people. Can we take that to heart?

Saturday

Another postcard from Memphis, Tennessee



The National Museum of Civil Rights stands next to the Lorraine Motel, now itself a part of the museum, where Martin Luther King was murdered on April 4th 1968.

It tells the story, decade by decade, from the first movement of enslaved Africans to the North American mainland in the 17th Century. The early exhibits show sketches and lithographs of slave life from old textbooks. The false dawn of the Civil War (1861-65) brings the first grainy photographs. For the following 100 years tension, progress and regression are chronicled (most Europeans don't learn about this bit), and the photographs become disturbingly clear and modern.

Suddenly you are in the video age and realise that you are seeing the events of your own lifetime, now with shocking realism. This isn't history anymore.

You hear the thrilling rhetoric of Dr King, and the bitter irony of his words: "I may not get there with you, but I have seen the Promised Land". As you visit the site of his martyrdom, you might expect you are at the end of the tour. But this is not the Museum of Martin Luther King. The Museum still has another 50 years of struggle to portray.

It doesn't get any more comfortable as the pictures and videos move into High Definition. They will soon, I am sure, be adding new exhibits for the 2020s. It may be a museum, but it isn't history.

Sunday

Postcard from Yellowstone/Grand Teton National Parks, Wyoming

As the cliché goes, everything is bigger in America. The twin parks of Yellowstone and Grand Teton are about the same size as Wales. We saw some really big animals there; bears, wolves, moose, bison and elk. But I want to share a photograph of a pika.

They are the size of a chipmunk, and they are the smallest member of the rabbit family. They live in a rocky habitat above the tree line, avoiding humans and just about everything else. Sightings by tourists are very rare; there is no point going out to look for them. They are a surprise treat for the lucky few who are willing to trek to a remote wilderness just to see what nature might chance to show them.

Over 7 years I have been privileged to see a pika three times, in three different mountain ranges (the last one in Canada). Only one of them stayed around close enough, and long enough for me to get a photograph.

In an age when big things grab the headlines, and we expect all our endeavours to bring us the targeted reward, we need to rejoice in the small things, and rejoice in the unexpected rewards.