

Thoughts for the day: 11-17 October 2021

by Rod Willis

The Great Outdoors

Monday 11th

The Great Outdoors - Digging

I have never been one for sitting indoors, reading or contemplating but find it more relaxing doing things. (I was going to say being busy, but then remembered advice from Spring Harvest many years ago - 'Be fruitful, rather than busy'). This week's thoughts are based on some of these activities.

I have always found digging a very satisfying pastime, having spent more time digging for building works rather than gardening. Digging around our home is always a solitary experience as none of the family have succumbed to the passion despite numerous invitations (!), but it does provide both thinking time and a chance to enjoy our environment.

Earlier this summer, our son asked if I could help their Cricket Club erect a storage shed for their field maintenance equipment including a heavy mechanical roller. Discussing the project with them, it was apparent that none of them had any idea what was involved. I spent a couple of weeks digging the foundations and finding hardcore for the base (I asked the cricket team if they had any hardcore lying around and, to my surprise, nobody

did!), and during that time, I met a variety of Bramfield residents who were both interested in what I was doing, and offered sustenance.

The restrictions we have all experienced since the first lockdown have encouraged people to speak to one another and take an interest in what is going on around them. Now that the situation seems to be improving, are we going to continue to be outward looking and welcoming of strangers?

'By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should build with care.' (1 Corinthians 3. 10)



Tuesday 12th

The Great Outdoors - School Journey

Back in July, I was asked to help on the Early Years School journey to Aldenham Country Park. We set off by coach from St Andrew's School having each been allocated four or five children to look after for the day. I was wondering quite what to expect - the previous school journey was almost 20 years ago, when our own children were primary school aged. The education system has changed enormously since then, let alone in my day. I do remember a school trip from Kent to London Zoo, and being told to close the windows to prevent the smoke from the steam engine getting into the carriage!

It was a largely uneventful journey on the coach, save that the children insisted on screaming loudly when we went through the Hatfield tunnel for some inexplicable reason.

On arrival, we wandered around the animal and bird enclosures, feeding the residents for the rest of the morning until it was lunchtime. I sat with a random group of children and we discussed a variety of subjects covering favourite lessons, healthy food in our packed lunches and what was happening in the afternoon. I expected them to be polite and well-behaved as they have a reputation for those traits, but it was their vocabulary and knowledge of healthy eating which (for 6-7 year olds) came as a surprise; I am certain I was neither as informed nor articulate at that age.

The afternoon was spent in the 100 Acres Wood playing Pooh Sticks, and climbing over trees to visit the homes of Owl, Rabbit, Eeyore, Kanga and Roo; simple pleasures which have enthralled and entertained children for many generations. Then on to the coach, another scream through the tunnel and back to school.

Since my own school journey, we have made major advances in travel, medicine, technology, food production - in fact, almost everything. We have also made some small steps in environmental management through better control of pesticides, but what sort of planet are we leaving for Years 1 and 2 at St Andrew's School, and their generation? What are we doing individually to ensure they are bequeathed a worthwhile inheritance?

'When wealth is lost through unwise business dealings, when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit.'
(Ecclesiastes 5.14)



Wednesday 13th

The Great Outdoors - Champions League!

As a number of readers may have anticipated, there was bound to be a football reference this week!

Jo loves the Champions League, although I am not really sure why as she never watches it on TV, and has never been to a home match. She has, however, come to Madrid, Turin, Barcelona, Milan and Munich!

A couple of years ago, our son and I went by train to Dortmund, passing through France and Belgium, arriving at our destination after dark. The following day, the overriding impression was that every residential, commercial or cultural building in and around the centre had been constructed since 1945. This seemed strange for what was an important 14th-Century Hanseatic League Free City, and more recently the production hub of German coal, iron and beer.

Spurs won 1-0 😊 and the next morning we boarded the train, and could not help but notice when passing through Dusseldorf and Cologne that neither city had an historic city centre. All these cities had suffered extensive bombing from 1943. Dortmund's city centre was completely destroyed one day in March 1945 - two months before VE Day.

Some months later, Jo and I travelled to a (dead rubber) match in Munich - capital of Bavaria, home of the Oktoberfest and a city of culture and learning, stretching

back centuries. There were numerous palaces, museums and Christmas markets to visit - the city is restored to its former glory.

A few stops on the metro from the city centre is the Dachau Memorial Camp, which was initially set up for political prisoners in 1933 as Europe feared the rise of communism following the Russian Revolution. What struck me about the early testimonies is that some inmates had been imprisoned more than once, but did not give up their beliefs. Later, the camp descended into a concentration camp where inmates transited to slave labour factories or extermination camps. Visiting the Memorial Camp seems to be part of Bavarian education and a reminder of the darkest period of their history.

Both Munich and the Ruhr cities are reminders of what humans are capable of.

'The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.'



Thursday 14th

The Great Outdoors - Walking

I have always enjoyed walking, particularly in rural areas. Even when I lived in South London, I was close to Blackheath, a flat expanse of open space, and Greenwich Park with numerous trees and stunning views over the Thames to the then derelict Royal Docks. Or I could meander my way along the embryonic Thames Pathway.

Moving to Hertford has provided many different walks. People speak of the faster pace and ever-changing environment of city living, however the changes on the rural walks are more constant - simply the seasons, the weather, the life cycle of plants or different livestock in fields.

I build walking into my usual weekly activities and aim for an average 10,000 steps a day (approximately 5 miles). Examples are walking to the station, to church, into Hertford or accompanying the School Walking Bus. Consequently, I gain the benefit of a healthier life and reduced use of the car. All it takes is a little forethought and getting up a tad earlier. On the days when there is no specific activity, I will usually stroll around Goldings, Waterford Marsh or one of the Heaths.

It has been quite noticeable this year that there are far fewer people walking compared to the first lockdown. Other than the physical benefits, it does provide thinking time, and a leisurely pace enables a proper appreciation of the environment, no matter how familiar it may be.

Further afield, we have been fortunate to have a few short breaks this year, and have learned the benefits of the advantages given by staying at a campsite close to a station. We park up and then properly explore the locality, like Chichester and the South Downs, rather than being tempted to visit every place of interest in that county.

We are stewards of this planet, and not only do we need to preserve it for future generations, but also appreciate its beauty and history for ourselves now.

For the beauty of the earth

...

Over and around us lies.

(Folliott Sandford Pierpoint)



Photo taken at Waterford Heath

Friday 15th

The Great Outdoors - Lockdown Projects

At the beginning of the first lockdown, I began to think about garden projects that would keep me occupied. Our family's reaction was, 'Why not finish the ones you've already started?', which seemed a little harsh! I decided on two schemes: replace the BBQ and create a raised herb garden. Plus, maybe some finishing off, if time permitted.

We have had a BBQ ever since we moved to Waterford - initially half an oil drum salvaged from a skip in Scotland, which eventually rusted away. The second was the stainless steel box from a defunct washing machine which, it seems, will go on forever, but its base was time limited.

The location was agreed, and at that time the supply of bricks was plentiful. I set about the task with a combination of materials old (paving slabs) and new (bricks and griddles). But, towards the end, I realised that I would need a firebox for the charcoal. Looking on the internet (a device which I mainly use for football and cricket scores), it was clear that the options seemed both expensive and not dissimilar to our trusted washing machine box - subject to further modification.

The project is completed and the washing machine box continues to serve us - but the BBQ is sadly underused due to a combination of weather, and being away on the rare occasions it has been sunny this year!

I have always wanted to grow herbs, but more pressing problems and a lack of an obvious location scuppered the idea. We had a very mature (ie old) mock orange (lovely blossom but terrible smell) in our patio. Its removal would leave an ideal site for the herbs, and cuttings from the plant were already established elsewhere, so the site was excavated (more digging!), soil replaced and bricks laid - job done. The finish included a mosaic of broken bathroom tiles to seal the top - and I am seldom regarded as artistic! Herbs have been very successful and added to our culinary repertoire. As for the unfinished, I can also report that the steps to the conservatory and summerhouse are complete!

Both the BBQ and herb bed contain old elements adapted for a new purpose and continue to provide a useful service.

Are there things that we need to adapt in our lives to do the same?



Saturday 16th

The Great Outdoors - Public Works

Most of us will have seen the various displays in St Andrew's churchyard, which began last year with the Christmas story and have continued to the present Lockdown Exhibition. They will no doubt provoke different reactions from people who have seen them, ranging from dismissive to inquisitive to unbridled joy. I wonder what your reaction was?

Undoubtedly, they are all an attempt to show that the church is alive and well, even if the building itself is closed. The purpose of the Christmas and Easter scenes was, to a large extent, self-explanatory - they were an act of witness and an acknowledgement of biblical events.

But as I sourced discarded equipment from St Andrew's School, I wondered why we were doing Noah's story. It doesn't form an obvious part of the Church's calendar, though most people have heard the story. Building an ark in August seems somewhat perverse, even with our weather!

The Ark took longer to assemble than anticipated, and I don't know whether it was because I was in the churchyard longer, if the fact it was during the summer holidays meant more folk were about, or maybe they just wondered, 'Why an ark?', but many more people spoke to me than with any of the other installations.

Comments ranged from “Better get a move on - it looks like rain!” to “You won’t get all those animals in there!”, and lonely people who just wanted to talk to somebody.

Two conversations stood out: A visiting catholic Spanish family from Madrid (whose limited English was substantially better than my Spanish, though I managed to explain that I had visited the Prada and the Bernabéu), who were fascinated with the tableau; and a long discussion with a young man from the middle east who was surprised to learn that Britain had been invaded a number of times, and that our Royal Family and ordinary people have connections to many European and other nations!



While all the exhibitions have probably brought a smile to people, the Ark got many folk talking.

What gets you talking?

'Go into the world and proclaim the Gospel to the whole of creation.' (Mark 16. 15)

Sunday 17th

The Great Outdoors - Seasons

When seasons are mentioned to you, what comes to mind? Seasons of the year (spring etc); agricultural (planting, growing, harvest etc); Church (advent, lent etc); or maybe seasons for summer and winter sports. All of these seasons overlap and conjure up images for us - some happy, some sad, and, for some, complete ambivalence!

Many of us have a favourite season, which for me is autumn; if the weather is good, it is uplifting, but if not, it is as expected. Whereas spring is the opposite; good weather seems infrequent but expected, and poor weather is disappointing. I'm not sure what a psychologist would make of it! Am I simply expecting too much, and not appreciating the here and now?

One of the most unsettling days of the year for me is the end of the county cricket season, which signals the end of summer and the expectation of damp gloomy days. In September 2019, I had travelled down to Canterbury for Kent's last fixture only for the entire four days to be rained off! More than a damp squib, you might say. To compound matters, no spectators were permitted in 2020.

So, almost two years to the day, having missed two successive reunions with friends at Tunbridge Wells and Canterbury Cricket festivals, we found ourselves back at the Spitfire Ground, supping pints of Spitfire ale, and (I kid you not) a Spitfire flew over the ground on two successive mornings. The sunshine was glorious - shorts and

obligatory sun hat. The match ebbed and flowed over the four days and ended with a very narrow victory for Kent on the fourth day.

It certainly is not nostalgia for a bygone age that gives me so much pleasure at Canterbury, but the opportunity to catch up with friends I first met at Oxfam almost 30 years ago. As the day stretches out, we can really talk about how our families and ourselves have been getting on in a way that we would never have at a quick drink after work. So, I was well prepared for the end of this summer. (I have also found my dream retirement home actually in Canterbury Cricket Ground courtesy of McCarthy and Stone (other providers are available!).)

Do the changing seasons affect you in different ways, and do you have someone with whom to share your concerns?

'For everything there is a season, and a time for every purpose under heaven.' (Ecclesiastes 3. 1)



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