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Covid, Inclusion and the Countryside

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?I suppose the pleasure of country life lies really in the eternally renewed evidences of the determination to live. ? Vita Sackville-West [1]

?Paradoxically, city people are the ones who praise the charms of country life. Exhausted by the busy and noisy city, they idealize the green tranquillity of the country life, forgetting that besides its charming qualities, country life also brings along many hardships.? (Unknown)

The idea of an old city verses countryside life isn't what I want to reflect on. Though having lived in London, Nottingham and Leicester I experienced both and confess from the start I prefer the countryside. Having said that, Covid has stormed all of our preconceived places of safety, home and security. In Leicester, I lived in a block of flats where people could buy anything, legal or illegal. It was loud with the underlying smell of pollution and desperation.

When I lived in Stoke Newington again there was a sense of need and desperation. A Sister who worked in a parish said that there was a lot of domestic violence in the area because of frustration, anger and stress boiling over (though the sister made it very clear in her pastoral work that domestic violence is never acceptable nor a rightful expression of emotion). She pointed out simply that sin is never in a void. Her point, I think, was this is one of many problems which are part of social disease.

So a move to the countryside seems so appealing. Yet it's simplistic to think that the countryside is a Utopia and a healer of all stresses and ills. Pre Covid there were, in my area (The Derbyshire Dales), many

addiction issues, there was much codependency on various things from drugs to online gambling. There was, and still is, a great sense of stress in the farming community and there have been many suicides among young people, often young men. There's a great lack of jobs, housing and security. Before Covid there was the disease of isolation in the elderly and bereaved. Covid has laid bare the problems in the countryside. Yes, there are many blessings- familiarity, community, communion (grass roots Christians are less worried about denomination), space to experience natural beauty though this last point is often unseen by those who are deeply stressed.

The Inclusive Church Network has helped me, and some of my parishes, to be more aware of issues like LGBTQ+, mental health issues, poverty (in the young and the elderly), isolation and the need to go out from the church and serve the community in a deeper and more sustainable way. We've even developed a Peace Garden to be a place where anyone can come and be still, shed tears or even to celebrate. It gives space, safety and peace. I believe IC has helped me not simply to be a priest who celebrates the Eucharist but one who also, more fully, lives out the Eucharist. I think this dynamic action is vital as we move forward living with Covid.

My point in this reflection is we need to serve and care for each other. We need to live out the values of IC and the Gospel in a deeper and more fully open way. The countryside and the rhythm of the seasons can teach us something which is different from the seasons in the city - times of death and new life; times of sorrow and potential; times of hope and despair. One other blessing of ministry is that most people know me in some way. I love that familiarity, that being not the Reverend Rector but the priest with the people. Covid in a dramatic and devastating way reminds us all, people of faith or none, that we are on the journey of life together.

IC reminds me that, in every chapter of that journey, I have to hold before me the image of Jesus on the road. He never was exclusive. He made time for everyone. At its best this 'making time' is a gift we often share in the countryside.

I finish with words of wisdom from the bible reminding us one day soon 'All Shall Be Well'

'While the earth remains, seed-time and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night, shall not cease.' (Genesis 8:22).

Stephen Monk is a regional ambassador for Inclusive Church in rural Derbyshire. Contact details of all our regional ambassadors are here[2].

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Links

[1] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vita_Sackville-West

[2] <https://www.inclusive-church.org/about-us/regional-ambassadors>