

Message from Bishop Rachel

16 July 2024



It is good to be back in the diocese after a few weeks away of so called ‘mini sabbatical’, during which time the political landscape changed dramatically.

There have been thanks to outgoing MPs with whom I and many of you will have had strong connections and relationship, and there are many new relationships to be forged as we make connection with and support our new MPs locally.

For me, as Anglican Bishop to HM Prisons in England and Wales there has been a political spotlight shone on prisons like never before, and I am of course delighted and hopeful about what might come into being with James Timpson as the new Prisons Minister. Over the past months I have been convening roundtable meetings in Westminster regarding prison and the steps we might take for transformational change. Participants have included parliamentarians across the political spectrum, reform charities, academics, judges, criminal justice practitioners, and those with lived experience, and much of what we have been discussing resonates strongly with the perspective of Lord Timpson.

It was very timely that near the start of my mini sabbatical I visited the Netherlands to look at their prison system, and it was good to reflect on how we could do prison differently. For me, God’s mission of transformation and reconciliation is at the heart, and I long to see an emphasis on the flourishing, value and dignity of individuals (including both victims and offenders) and the whole community. Relationship must be key in every aspect of our criminal justice system.

I was accompanied on the visit by Andrea Coomber (the CEO of the Howard League), Pia Sinha (the CEO of Prison Reform Trust), Lucy Taylor, and Jennifer Bennett (my parliamentary and policy researcher). If you are interested, you can listen to a short podcast which is the first in my new series of [‘Holding the key: A series of conversations to unlock the door to doing prison differently.’](#)

Rachel Sylvester, the journalist who is leading The Times Crime and Justice Commission undertook her visit to the Netherlands alongside us and there was a long article by her in The Times on Saturday (13 July). [Times subscribers can read it here.](#)

I also spent part of my mini sabbatical visiting Israel-Palestine, primarily in the West Bank where there has been under-reporting of the devastating situation there whilst the spotlight shines on the horrific situation in Gaza.

I went at the invitation of the Dean of St George’s College Jerusalem, the Very Revd Canon Richard Sewell, and was accompanied by Dr Charles Reed, International Policy Adviser for the Church of England. The aim of the visit was primarily to show solidarity with the Episcopal Diocese of Jerusalem and local Christians, whose voices have too easily been ignored. [There is a short factual account of my visit here](#) and a much longer piece here in which I share my reflections around [‘Identity, separation, power and trauma.’](#)

I also made a short [podcast with the Church Times](#) a few hours after landing back in the UK.

Whilst on the surface this visit might seem very different from that of the visit to the Netherlands, the issues of justice and people’s flourishing, value and dignity were also at the

heart. Both visits were about people's lives which have been shaped by past stories, and with a longing for a different future.

I do also want to assure you that I had some days of retreat at the start of my weeks away and I finished with a good holiday before returning to Gloucester. Whilst in the beauty of the Polish Tatra Mountains it was good to be able to rest, reflect, read and pray.

From our apartment we had stunning views over the mountains, but we also had the experience of some construction work going on as new apartments were being built on the land next to ours. It led to me reflecting further on God's continual work of creation and bringing new things into being, and I found myself pondering what is temporal and what is eternal.

During my time in Jerusalem I was very grateful to visit the Holy Sepulchre which was not about being part of a group pilgrimage as in previous visits, but was simply about going there to pray. The time of kneeling in the places of Christ's crucifixion, burial and resurrection were extraordinary moments of being grounded in the unchanging love and hope of Jesus Christ amid the world's present beauty and brokenness.

Just as I have lived a different rhythm over the past 6 weeks with many different foci, so for many people the end of the school term and the coming in of August will bring a different rhythm and shape to life. As we live these weeks ahead, whatever they hold for you, may prayer and the reading of Scripture continue to deepen our understanding and our relationship with God, one another, creation and Self. May we be continually curious as we look and listen more intently, that we might see and hear in new ways as we continue to grow and live out what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ amid the joy and pain of daily life, locally and across our country and world.

“ I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full”

(words of Jesus from John 10:10)

With my thanks and prayers as ever

+ Rachel