

Message from Bishop Rachel

30 July 2024



Over the last few days I have really enjoyed watching some of the Olympic swimming events. One of the things I have found most heart-warming is that at the end of a race, the swimmers, many of them quite young, duck under the ropes separating the lanes to congratulate one another. They express solidarity and care for other participants.

Sadly, that friendship, care, and going towards one another even in places of pain and disappointment, stands in stark contrast to some of the relationships between the countries those young competitors are representing.

As I reflect on the past week I have lived, I recognise that a number of conversations, meetings and engagements have arisen because there has been an absence or abuse of friendship and care for people. Life has not always looked like those young swimmers demonstrating friendship at the end of a race. Whether it has been speaking with people regarding situations in parishes; meeting with men on a prison visit; continuing to engage with issues around violence against women and girls; taking part in a justice debate in the House of Lords; meeting with families of hostages held by Hamas; or being immersed in a media storm regarding an article in The Telegraph, following [my reflections on my time in the West Bank](#).

In 2011 the UN General Assembly declared that 30 July each year would be marked as The International Day of Friendship, rooted in the idea that friendship between peoples, countries, cultures and individuals can inspire peace efforts and build bridges between communities. While there was and is a particular emphasis on young people, the UN encourages governments, organisations and civil society groups to hold events and shape initiatives which promote dialogue among people, countries and communities, and which inspire mutual understanding, solidarity and reconciliation.

Although it is easy for my mind to immediately return to Israel-Palestine, or to reflect on the whole system change needed across our criminal justice system in order to bring restoration, peace and transformation, I also think of some very local situations across our diocese, as well as the ongoing dialogue, care and bridge-building which is needed as we live this chapter in the life of the Church of England.

Friendship is not a fluffy word. Friendship is about walking towards and walking alongside, even in our places of difference. Amazingly, Jesus Christ who has been exalted to the highest place and whose name is above every name (Philippians 2:9), chooses to call his followers friends (John 15:12-17), even with our flaws and places of brokenness.

Perhaps today is a good day to reflect on what deeper friendship might look like within our different contexts, and how friendship might relate to that commandment to 'love your neighbour as yourself.'

As August begins, often with a different rhythm and time to catch up with those we easily identify as friends, it might also offer space to reflect on how we might nurture that ethos of friendship more widely, and to commit to pray for some specific situations where friendship is needed within communities, between individuals, between groups, nations and peoples. I'm certainly asking where I might duck under a few more ropes of separation.

This comes with my heartfelt good wishes, thanks and prayers as August unfolds.

+ Rachel