

Dear Friends,

During a time of some annual leave in the past few weeks, I stayed with a friend in Yorkshire. On one of the days, we went to visit Fountains Abbey in North Yorkshire, near Ripon. The Abbey had been founded in the early 1100s and the monks who established it became part of the Cistercian order within a few years. There were some lay brothers as part of the community who helped Fountains to become particularly wealthy although this changed during the Middle Ages in a period of economic challenge. The Abbey was a victim of the Dissolution of the Monasteries and now stands as a ruin.

The Abbey is largely hidden from view and approached by foot. To see the previously huge building hidden in a 'valley' was quite something. There is definitely a sense that you are in a holy place of peace as you walk around it. Yet it is undoubtedly a ruin and a place which has seen better days. Whilst standing there, I thought of the passage in Exodus where Moses is standing at the burning bush. He had led his flock beyond the wilderness to the mountain and the bush would not burn up. Whilst we had most definitely gone downhill, rather than up a mountain, there was a strong sense of standing on holy ground and being in the unending presence of God. A ruin can remind us of what has gone before, of a time where better things have taken place, where beauty has passed away, and it can be a place of desolation. Yet there was also a sense of hope, new life and new beginnings found in the growing grass and in the celebration of God's creation through the wildflowers and wasps or bees which were making a nest at the top of one of the walls. God's presence was tangible, and ever present.

During the summer months there is often a sense of reviewing and reflecting on what has been and where the signs might be for the future. We may feel that there are parts of our lives which were more beautiful than they are now, or that we are longing for a time past which cannot be recovered. We are reminded that God's presence is always there, in all things and at all times. God's presence, like the burning bush, can never be extinguished. This should bring us a sense of peace, hope and comfort.

As we approach this month why not think through the signs of new hope that can be seen in the world around? It may be in the most unusual of places, the broken pot or in seeing a building that is not quite what it used to be. It may be that new signs of God's presence are seen in the lives of those around you and that new beginnings come as the transforming love of Christ is seen in a fresh way. Whatever the situation or circumstance, whether life is easy or more difficult, God's presence through the Holy Spirit is always there, finding new ways of expressing hope, peace and comfort and we know that it is there forever. Let us rejoice in that!

God bless,
Chris