

To be a pilgrim....

As many of you know, I had the privilege of spending a week with the Lutheran Church of Finland during October. This wasn't as holiday, as I was at pains to point out (!) but a visit that I made in my role as Chair of the Diocesan Tampere Link Group. Tampere, a city about 200km to the north of Helsinki gives its name to a diocese in the Lutheran church and Manchester diocese has had a link with this diocese for around 20 years.



This was my sixth visit to Tampere and as usual I had a wonderful time, enjoying the generous hospitality of all whom I met. There were two purposes for my visit – to have meetings with diocesan officers to think about how we might further develop the link and also to spend time in a parish for a few days seeing what regular parish life is like. Before, when I've visited it's been for special events where you get shown the best parts of parishes but I wanted to be able to compare the daily mission and ministry of a church with the experience of us in Manchester.

The Lutheran church is in some ways is very similar to the Church of England – although I don't understand Finnish, I could recognise the different parts of the Sunday service I took part in with the Bishop as the liturgy is so similar. The church also differs in that Finnish people pay a church tax which is given to the church in return for the church providing social care in the community. The tax used to be compulsory but this was changed a couple of years ago but still 50% of the population pay it. This means that the church employs many workers (musicians, administrators, counsellors, youth, children and family workers) – a far cry from the situation here in Manchester!

I learned a lot and have come back with some fresh ideas that I hope will inform my own ministry. However, there were two encounters that particularly meant a lot to me.

The first was a service that I went to on a dark wet evening at a farmhouse on the edge of the parish I was visiting. We were welcomed in and directed up a steep wooden staircase, emerging into an attic set up as a chapel. The altar was a carpenter's bench, there were various wooden chairs for us to sit on and candles lit the space. We sat wrapped up in our coats and celebrated the eucharist with bread baked by the farmer. Again, the service was in Finnish except for one Taizé chant which was sung in English, but I didn't need the English words because I could sense deep within me the common thanks and praise that we were offering to God and our sharing together with bread and wine as the body of Christ. After the service, we were welcomed into the farm's dining room and sat around a large wooden table, eating traditional bread, cheese and cakes. It felt as though we were doing something that was deeply embedded in the tradition of that farm for generations – God's people meeting there together once a week for prayer and hospitality. I came away feeling truly blessed.

The second encounter was with my friend Jussi. He is a priest and his ministry is focussed on spirituality and leading pilgrimages. Whenever we meet, he likes to walk and this time we walked up to the shore of the lake where he suggested we stop and look. He explained how he loved the grey of the sky and the water. At first I didn't get what he was seeing for grey just makes me feel cold and miserable! But as I looked, the grey had so many shades. There were flashes of silver as the sun tried to break through the clouds, there were patches that were dark and the more I looked, the more shades of grey I saw. It no longer felt like a cold dreary landscape but one that was really quite beautiful. I finally understood why Jussi had asked us to stop at this vast expanse of water – for even

in what at first might seem dull and uninteresting, the beauty of God's creation can be discovered! Through stopping and looking, being quiet and still, I discovered a sense of oneness with God and creation that in what at first might seem dull and uninteresting, the beauty of God's creation can be discovered! Through stopping and looking, being quiet and still, I discovered a sense of oneness with God and creation that sustained me throughout the rest of the day. At the end of our walk, Jussi gave me a pendant with a cross that he had made which he gives to all who go on his pilgrimages – a precious reminder of our time together.

These two brief events reminded me that along our journey in life, there are always new opportunities and experiences to encounter God, whether in organised worship or just taking time to stop and stare. To be a pilgrim, we just need to keep alert to see where God is revealing himself to us – through time spent with others, through the world around us. As we do this, we may discover God's blessing afresh!

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