

13th October 2020

Dear Friends

Several years ago, Theresa May M.P caused some controversy when she characterised the debate about Brexit as a debate between citizens of nowhere and citizens of citizens of somewhere. She was arguing that some people have lost their sense of place and failed to understand why many people need a sense of home, the familiar, a sense of memory and belonging that is rooted in communities they know well. I think her argument had some merit although I think she was mistaken to characterise people with a wider sense of European belonging as citizens of nowhere. When I lived in London, I once caught the first train of the day from St Pancras to Brussels to see a friend who lived there and had a memorable day walking about that remarkable city with him. I loved that sense of connection, the sense that a whole continent was on our doorstep, but it didn't prevent me having a profound sense of my own place.

Earlier this year Trish gave me a copy of a wonderful book with the title. 'Yorkshire' It's written by Richard Morris who is an emeritus professor of archaeology at Huddersfield University and on its cover is an iconic Yorkshire landmark, Roseberry Topping. The book is described as 'a lyrical history of England's greatest county' and I think that describes it well. It reminded me that we missed Yorkshire day at church this year and I hope we can celebrate it next year.

Anyway, I thought I would share with you my own hymn to Yorkshire, our own county which some people have described as 'God's own country.' Without being parochial I think this is a way of recognising that our county contains more or less every kind of landscape you could hope to find in the United Kingdom, that it is a microcosm of the whole nation.

As a child our gateway to Yorkshire was the Humber Bridge. The vast span crossing the wide waters of the Humber was a marvel that still takes my breath away. I have walked across it more than once and been almost paralysed by fear as I stood gazing up at its soaring columns aware that there was nothing but a thin strip of concrete

between me and the river hundreds of feet below. My dad was stationed at Spurn Point when he was a young national service man, and I loved our family expeditions to this long spit of sand where the Holderness ends and the sea is eroding the fragile coastline. Coming and going we would pass through Hull, the city where one of my favourite poets Philip Larkin was a librarian at the university for many years. His poem the Whitsun weddings which describes a railway journey one sleepy Whitsunday has fired my imagination since I was in my teens. It's not a city I know well but more than once I stayed with my friend Alan Berry when he was minister of East Park Baptist Church and I remember his cheerful generosity when I stayed with him and his family.

As an adult coming up from the Midlands I would cross the Humber and make for Beverly where I once stayed at the Youth Hostel and had a happy evening at the pub with a young German woman talking about the two Germanys in the days before the fall of the wall. That was on the second night of walking part of the Wolds way. The Wolds are a hidden treasure. You can cross them on the high roads without discovering the chalk valleys and the small villages. My favourite is Thixendale that nestles in a steep sided valley where narrow lanes descend to a linear community that was so hidden no television signal could reach it for many years. Not far from here is Wharram Percy, a lost medieval village and the quiet village of Wharram le Street where I once encountered a shaggy dog, but I can tell you that story another day.

On the edge of the Wolds is the seaside town of Bridlington. I remember staying here when the Baptist Assembly met at the town in 1994, staying in a small bed and breakfast that served wonderful steamed puddings with custard and sharing a remarkable evening of memories with Keith Hobbs the regional minister for the other side of the Pennines and my friend Paul. Keith described the way his severe parents who refused to let him participate in the celebrations for V.E day were among the few people he knew who welcomed German P.O.W's in their home.

I love the Yorkshire coast and once walked from Scarborough to Whitby in a single day following the paths along the high cliff edge and rejoicing in the incredible views of Robin Hoods bay from Ravenscar. On another occasion I was once invited to make up a foursome by strangers on the Crown Green at Robin Hoods Bay and am looking forward to playing again now we are living in Yorkshire. Crown Greens are more or

less unknown in the South and it remains for me one of the most peaceful and relaxing sports you could play.

Although I had several childhood holidays in Scarborough and love the Stephen Joseph Theatre in that town my favourite Yorkshire resort is Whitby where I holidayed for many years. West of here are the Moors which Trish and I have been rediscovering since we moved to Huddersfield a year ago. One of our oldest heritage railways threads its way through the Moors and when we have stayed in Pickering the sound of railway engines gathering steam and blowing their whistles has been one of the distinct and unusual things that I have cherished.

I could go on and on and another day I will continue to share my hymn to this county that is our home.

In our harvest worship I reflected on the challenges of not being able to go home and I know this was appreciated by some people who feel this deeply at the moment. Our ultimate home is in God, but God has also given us a sense of place. We all need somewhere to call home and learning to make a home in a new place is one of the greatest challenges we can face. It takes courage and ingenuity to do this. When Jeremiah wrote to the exiles in Babylon who asked, 'How can we sing the Lord's song in a strange land.' Psalm 137 vs 4 he told them 'Build houses and live in them, plants gardens and eat their produce, find partners in marriage, have families and raise your children who will have families of their own, so grow, increase, don't decrease. Seek the wellbeing of the city where I have sent you into exile and pray to the Lord on it's behalf'

At the moment we are all learning to live in a strange land which is familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown but it is still God's place where we are called to go on making our homes and seeking the well being of our neighbours. To do that we need one-another.

Our scriptures are full of a sense of place and I look forward to exploring that theme with you more in the weeks to come.

Your friend and pastor

Mark