

It wasn't the summer we expected. My wife and I had planned a holiday in northern Spain and France in our new caravan, but four days before we were due to go, we hit a deer on the A14. We were advised not to take the car, so that meant no caravan. So we decided to travel in my wife's car – a modest Hyundai i10 – and take our tent instead. My wife and I enjoy each other's company, but we've never spent three weeks under canvas before. We had a great holiday, not least because the weather was so good.

One of the highlights of our trip was a visit to Lourdes. Neither of us is a fan of that kind of religion, but I was surprised to find it a very moving experience. Looking back, I think I was prepared for it by another one of the summer's highlights, a conference I attended at St George's Windsor, that focussed on how we might speak about God in today's world. As part of our preparation we were asked to read Sally Vickers' book *The Cleaner of Chartres*, not the kind of book I would normally look at. It's about the impact of a rather mysterious and scandalous set of events surrounding a young woman.

At the heart of the story is the great cathedral at Chartres, which is dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. One of the characters is working on the restoration of one of the windows, and he spends a lot of time looking at its image of the Virgin. He's an atheist, but for me he speaks the best theology in the whole book. "I don't see her as the mother of God", he says. "She is more the spirit of all motherhood". An image of tender motherly love.

His words led me to a deeper appreciation of the mother of Jesus. Mary reminds us of the tenderness of God: a tenderness that is never less than costly.

This was in my mind as I was preparing for today. I brought it to my reading of the scriptures we've just heard. St Paul's letter to

Philemon is his response to a rather surprising turn of events. Philemon is a church leader in one of the cities in today's Turkey, and a co-worker and friend of Paul. One of Philemon's slaves, a man called Onesimus, has run away after behaving badly. It seems he's stolen some money from his master. He's made his way to Paul, and through him become a Christian.

Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, and asks him to set aside his right to punish him. Paul's language is tender. He's moved when he remembers Philemon's love and faith, for the church and for Paul himself. And now he asks Philemon to treat Onesimus with that same love. "I'm sending my own heart back to you. I hope you'll treat him as more than a slave – as a beloved brother".

Treat him with the tenderness of Christ-like love. Surround him with the tenderness of God.

Which is always costly, as today's gospel reminds us (Luke 14.25-33). Father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, possessions, even life itself, must take second place to following Christ, symbolised by carrying the cross and following Jesus. The way of Christian faith is always costly, because it lives out the call of Jesus, and the way he embodies the costly tenderness of God.

A surprising summer, then, with a conference and a holiday that left me with a renewed vision of God.

Which brings us here, to another place dedicated to the Virgin Mary, and to the aftershocks of last week's news, as we start to pick up the pieces and continue our Christian journey. Big shocks produce a bewildering mixture of feelings and thoughts. Think about the impact of bereavement, or redundancy, or the breakdown of a relationship, or discovering you've got a serious illness. Disbelief. Confusion. Anger. Guilt. Regret, and more.

There's no smooth progress from one to the other on the road to

some kind of resolution. Instead we experience a jumbled-up mixture of things.

And the messiness inside us is also the messiness between us and around us, as different ones respond in their own way. There is no 'one size fits all' in situations like this, no 'right way' to respond. Except that in a Christian community, our lives are constantly being shaped by the tenderness of God that we see in Jesus Christ. A tenderness that eventually heals because it is prepared to be costly.

What struck me about Lourdes was that it was such a prayerful place. People go there – 5 million visitors a year, which is nearly 14000 every day – not for miracles but to experience something of the grace of God that changes people's lives. As I looked around the grotto there it struck me that its pilgrims immerse the experience they take to Lourdes in prayer, and allow themselves to be soaked in the living water that is Jesus.

That same prayerful spirit is available here, in our benefice. It allows the grace of God to work on our thoughts and feelings and relationships, and to fashion us in the tenderness of God – a tenderness that is never less than costly.

That will mean being patient with ourselves and each other, as we face up to the bewildering jumble of what we find inside us and around us. It will mean resisting the temptation to become obsessed with the stuff that sells newspapers. It will mean taking some words of St Paul to heart: "Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, focus on these things" (Philippians 4.8).

My role is to be available to you as a visible sign of the Diocese's day-to-day care for you. I'm not here to change things, or to get in the way of good things that you are wanting to develop. I'm here

to bring some stability, to pray for you and with you, to meet with you, to listen to how you are .... and to remind you constantly of the tenderness of God, which is never less than costly because it is determined to heal.

A prayerful spirit will take many forms, and it will unite us with everyone who is part of what has happened: Martin, Pauline and their family, victims of wrongdoing here and elsewhere, those who suffer as a result of the world's turmoil and injustice. And with our own wider communities here in Hadleigh, Layham and Shelley.

Today's readings remind us that the Christian vocation is always to live the tenderness of God, which is never less than costly. To be tender with ourselves, and among ourselves, and between ourselves and the people that we serve in this part of Suffolk in the name of Christ. Pray, then, that at the end of this surprising summer and in all that lies ahead, we might find the grace we need to be faithful to the one whose tender love is more than we can ever imagine.

John Parr, September 4<sup>th</sup> 2016