

Counting Our Blessings Without Complacency

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Daily life includes reading newspapers and books. My current shelves include a 1941 Penguin paperback book of prayers and reflections for six days of the week. The compiler could assume readers would be in church on Sunday. I am also reading about Royal Institution lectures on astronomy and cosmology over more than a century. It is fascinating to know now what the cleverest assumed decades ago.

Each day, having reported to the Covid symptom study that I have had neither test nor symptom, yet, I look at the daily extract of a book of hundreds of travellers' tales from land and sea. During these months of changed lives, I miss travel and I miss church. During the weekly internet gossip with my surviving siblings, our younger sister talks of her role as a church warden when the bishop read banns of marriage for the fourth time: the first became out-of-time because of church closures.

Journeys allow us to see how people live around the country and around our shared world. During a research call this week with a PhD researcher about British aid programmes in Latin America I was asked to recall a variety of visits to El Salvador, the nation named after the Saviour where priests were killed. I explained how I was chosen to lead the Nobel nomination of St Oscar Romero. Then I was asked to join the Human Rights mission that aimed to delay or to stop his expected martyrdom.

Later, I represented the British Council of Churches at his funeral when fourteen people died around me. Years passed before I was an observer at reasonably free and fair elections. It was awesome to see country people walk three hours to a polling station, wait for more hours queuing in relentless sun, before going home past disapproving military checkpoints.

While in the country, I admired the Vivienda Minima aid project. Homeless unskilled people created basic home plots with electricity, main drains and piped water. Each started with one room; there were foundations for three more and a second floor could be added when possible. Results: earnings, homes and experienced workers.

On a Commonwealth Parliamentary delegation to South Africa, near Cape Town we saw brilliant, successful community primary health projects that allowed people living with HIV/Aids to be useful, occupied and accepted as normal. In KwaZulu-Natal we saw the large-scale work of the Umgeni water company, bringing piped clean water each year to another 100,000 people, using local knowledge and local workers whenever possible.

When I am called to try to help resolve a building problem in Arun or to support a major improvement in health provision in central Worthing, I remember with thanks that our lives can usually take for granted that water and power are available at the turn of a tap or flick of a switch. Through the time of crisis, refuse was collected and waste pipes flowed. Constituents and I join in thanking the essential workers whose dedication allows us to rely on them.

Most of my endeavours in private and in public are directed at alleviating problems, being with constituents at times of trial or unhappiness. Additionally, often with fellow MPs, I can aid our local councils as they look ahead to the quiet undramatic provision of services to local people. For all the difficulties and sadnesses, there is enough success, sufficient fun and when I fail, important causes require me never to give up. Setbacks are frequent. Join me in living with hope for the future and with joy for the present.