

Thoughts from the Manse 8th January 2021

Firstly, I would like to wish you all a Happy and Healthy New Year. Things can only improve, and whilst we are walking a tightrope between virus and vaccine now, we can pray for a tipping of the balance which will lead us on the path to the promised new normal. It will be a new normal because we have been learning to live and work differently and those lessons will stay with us as we begin to rebuild life in community. Meanwhile, we are in winter and as I researched the winter logo for the website, I took a moment to revisit some winter photographs. I was reminded of a winter picture from Rodborough looking across through mist to bare winter trees with a red sun setting behind and this is the logo I settled on with the thought that everything is stripped back to the essentials in winter and we begin to see what is important. It is a bit like living through a pandemic when you are forced to realise what is really important in and for life, and what you can do without.

As I revisited my winter photos I was struck by the many shades and colours they demonstrated and how God's glory shines even amid what feels like a monochrome setting. I chose four photos that represent this, the first is reflections in a pool at Lydiard Park in Swindon, viewed during a winter spiritual walk with my spiritual partner, Debbie. As well as the presence of evergreens there is that splash of colour from the dogwood.



The second photograph is only just a winter photograph as it was taken at Easter in 2013, which was the 31st March, however it shows the snow on the Campsie Fells in Scotland. I was at the end of my sabbatical and so free to visit for Easter and this was Easter Day as we went for a drive to Aberfoyle before crossing the Trossachs to Callander. It is so typically winter that I had to include it in my selection.

The third photograph is from Anglesey Abbey in Cambridgeshire which I visited, again with Debbie, during a sabbatical stay at Westminster College. They have a specialized Winter Garden which was full of colour in February with spring flowers peeping through the cold soil, snow white birch trees and here a wonderful display of Dogwood simply reminding us of the flames of Pentecost.



My final selection was a group of January snowdrops having forced their way through some very solid winter soil. The power of those tender shoots which arrive so early in the year has always amazed me. On this occasion the ground was frozen hard as we were living in Rodborough and the church and manse were some 300m above sea level and often covered in snow and ice even when the town below was not.

This reminds me that God's glory is all around even when our brains fool us into seeing the world in monochrome. Take a closer look at your garden, or when you are on a walk, and observe the glory of God in berries, branches tinged with colour, and the first shoots of snowdrops beneath trees. Perhaps you have some cyclamen or polyanthas or colour from Heucheras. Very soon the Forsythia buds will begin to appear, the crocuses will start to shoot, primroses appear in the hedgerows and, of course, daffodils. We were always amazed at how early the daffodils appeared in the South West, there would be banks of them in the towns in February but normally they signal the end of winter and the beginning of Spring.

At the end of November, we visited the Garden Centre to purchase some winter colour for the garden, maybe we knew it was going to be a bleak winter, and so we have pots filled with many different colours brightening up the decking to remind us that God's glory is all around us.

