

From a Supernumerary's Study

Dear Friends,

The Lord is risen!

He is risen indeed!

It is a long time since I wrote a pastoral letter. I don't know what Keith will be doing this morning – not reading this, I hope. He is on sabbatical. A sabbatical is not a holiday, but it is a rest from the busy life of a circuit minister, especially a superintendent minister. I remember mine – I only had one, because half my active ministry was spent as an army chaplain – and it wasn't easy to let go. I was still in the manse at the beginning and end of it. I still walked along the High Street and to and from the railway station (remember those days?) and met people from the church. I say 'met'; but one or two thought they shouldn't speak to me while I was 'off' and even crossed the road to avoid me. Don't do that to Keith, please. I did have a couple of weddings booked, and did cheat, I confess; but they were at the beginning and end of the sabbatical and I didn't tell my District Chair. I did study: I brushed up my German in time for the Evangelische Kirchentag in Hannover (think the Christian Resources Exhibition multiplied by a hundred, taking over a city); did a 'Hebrew in Seven Days' course in preparation for my time in Israel (all forgotten now, sadly); and began a series of biblical geography tours in Galilee and Jordan, followed by a symposium on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Now isn't the time to tell that story. But there's something else about a sabbatical I do want to share.

You know what it's like sometimes when we go to bed; or when we spend time on our own, as some of you do a lot and all of us do sometimes: we think. I suspect that Keith is thinking just now. Martin Israel puts it very well in his book 'Living Alone': 'the impact of memories of the past on one's present awareness.' You see, and I know that this will come as a surprise to you, ministers sometimes make mistakes. We get it wrong. We speak without thinking. We never mean to, but we sometimes hurt the people we are called to care for. We know we could do better. And you thought we were perfect! I suspect that Keith is reviewing his ministry amongst us, and, over the next months be looking ahead to his return. Keith is a lovely man. I think he is a brilliant superintendent and a fine pastor and preacher, but ministers tend to

be their own severest critics. So, there is an element of the spiritual retreat about a sabbatical. I quote Martin Israel again: 'It is the Holy Spirit, the one who leads us to all truth such as we can bear at the present time, who reveals our past attitudes, inclinations and dispositions to us, and makes us face up to our responsibilities.'

The sabbatical makes space for that to happen. The sabbatical becomes a time of healing, of integration, of rediscovery, of renewed commitment. It's more than a recharging of the batteries. It's more than an opportunity to do something different. It is a rebirth, in a way.

D'you know what? We all need a sabbatical. Not three months away, but time set apart for God, to allow the Holy Spirit to take over, to be refashioned, renewed, made whole again.

Blessings,

Peter