

Ebb and Flow

The summer months provide a welcome opportunity for many people to go outside and experience nature. This summer I have been near, on or in the water for much of my summer holidays. It has long been a fascination for me how I can enjoy walking in the rain during a holiday, but still dislike getting wet travelling to work!

The Boys' Brigade canoed on Bala Lake this year during their annual camp. Bala Lake is in Gwynedd, Wales. It is a beautiful, glacial freshwater lake formed by a receding glacier at the end of the last ice age, leaving behind a dam-like structure to fill with clear water. There was an opportunity at the end of the session to jump off the canoe - it was cold, invigorating and the water was crystal clear!

Swimming in the sea off Scarborough Bay was a very different experience. The North Sea was cold, and the mouthfuls of sea water were accidentally swallowed, because of a surprising wave, a prompt reminder of the unpredictability of the surroundings.

In Cork, we walked alongside the River Lee. The river is wide and majestic, unusually, as it has two channels which run either side of the town centre, before coming back together and flowing on to form Cork Harbour. The Lee is tidal. The first time we realised this was late at night; in the dark we worried the river would overflow its banks!

In the town centre, the river was full, and the harbour was also full. However, travelling from Cork to Cobh, we saw areas where the river was no more than a stream, surrounded by sandbanks; huge stretches of claggy, sticky mud, fascinating to look at, but not to step on.

I really appreciate being outside. Nature has a way of teaching us things, wordlessly, if we take the opportunity to spend time with her. In nature we find perspective, balance, harsh realities and glimpses of hope and renewal.

For me, Bala Lake represents freedom and choice. There are a multitude of ways to spend our free time, and the breadth of choice can mean we miss the most valuable experiences and people because we are looking in the wrong direction. Sitting quietly outside for a short time each day can bring such peace and clarity. We may find we set aside our "go to" choices, and venture out into something new.

A mouthful of the North Sea, and the coughing and spluttering that comes with it, reminds us of how vulnerable we are; how unpredictable human life can be. With our calendars and planners, work schedules and deadlines, we can be forgiven for thinking we set the agenda for our lives. It is good to have aspirations and wise to plan ahead, but it is also important to remember our lives are inexplicably linked to those throughout the whole world. Our decisions and actions affect others, and their actions directly affect us too.

I spent a long time looking at the River Lee, thinking about how it changes from a stream to a mighty river, drawn in and out by the changing tides, then reduced to meandering rivulets of water before picking up speed and rushing over the cobbled stone beach to flow into the Celtic Sea. It reminded me strongly of the life of the church. There are times when the building is full, and there are calls to bring more chairs from side rooms and hall. There are times when the worship leader sighs deeply, scanning the many empty seats before their eye gazes over the faithful few, and a warm smile tugs at their lips. There are moments when church life is claggy and slow going, less fun and only fascinating to curious onlookers, who do not understand what all the fuss is about.

Yet, always there is movement, the waters continue to flow. Prayers are said, songs of praise are sung. The scriptures are read, the bread is broken and the Holy Spirit is welcomed and received with gladness. Our unbroken stream of worship flows up to the heart of our God, rushing over the cobblestoned roads of heaven, proclaiming our love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Then he showed me a river of the water of life, clear as crystal. Coming from the throne of God and of the Lamb.” Revelation 22 v 1.

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