



OCTOBER PASTORAL LETTER

Jacky writes:

As I come towards the end of my time as Rector here, I am discovering something I hadn't quite expected: the exquisite tenderness of goodbye.

I felt it particularly strongly recently at St Mary's, Sydenham. I came to the end of the service and raised my hand to pronounce the blessing, as I have done so many times before. And suddenly I realised that this was the last time I would stand in that place and speak those words over that congregation.

It caught me completely by surprise. I knew I was leaving, of course, but in that moment, I really *felt* that I was leaving and the feeling was incredibly intense, and has stayed with me it ever since.

The closest I can get to describing it is as an exquisite tenderness.

Exquisite is a word we tend to use for something exceptionally beautiful, delicate or fine.

It has been a beautiful thing to be part of this community, sharing so many different experiences with you and growing close through friendship and fellowship.

But exquisite can also mean something so acutely felt, that it can be almost painful. And that be exactly right for these last weeks.

I feel balanced on the knife edge between the pain of leaving and the beauty of what we have shared. And then there is tenderness. We handle something that is tender gently because it is precious. But a tender place can also be a sore place.

My heart is tender at the moment in both senses.

There is so much here that is precious to me, and leaving makes my heart sore. I don't think I need to hurry that sadness away. These years have mattered. You have allowed me into your lives, sometimes at moments when everything has changed. We have carried difficult things together and had plenty to laugh about.

God has been with us in all of it, often in ways we have only recognised afterwards. Perhaps that is why the blessing at Sydenham affected me so deeply.

I have said those words hundreds of times: *the blessing of God Almighty ... be among you and remain with you always*. But that day I heard the last few words differently. "Remain with you always" felt very poignant because I won't remain here.

Being your priest has been an extraordinary privilege. For these years, my life has been bound up with yours. Now that is changing, and knowing that the time is right to move doesn't stop me feeling the sadness of it.

Yet the blessing has never depended on my staying. It is God's blessing, and God will still be here, among the people I love, in the places I have come to know so well. I find that comforting, even while my heart is sore.

Jesus knew what it was to part from people he loved. There is room in our faith for the sadness of goodbye. I can trust that God will be with us all in what comes next.

Thank you for allowing me into your lives and trusting me with things that matter deeply. Thank you for the friendship and the cups of tea, and for all we have shared in worship. We haven't always agreed, and some things have been difficult. Those are part of our time together too. I am grateful for the love you have shown me, and I will miss you.

When I pronounce the blessing for the last time, I suspect I will find it difficult to get through. But I will mean every word:

*The blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,
be among you and remain with you always.*

That will still be my prayer for you as I leave this parish, alongside a great sense of gratitude and privilege for having been your Rector.

