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Dear friends,

Due to holidays and deadlines I write this in the middle of August. There is chaos at the airports due to the uncovered plot to blow up aircraft flying from England to the USA. I am due to fly there at the end of August. Hopefully as you read this I have been and returned safely. War rages in the Middle East and we wonder quite how far it will spread. Yesterday I took a funeral, one of many in August, far more than is usually the case. At the house after the funeral, one of the friends of the deceased said to me, "So you believe there is a loving God up there?" Without wanting to enter into conversation with him about what "up there" meant, I responded, "of course God loves us". He looked at me with disbelief. We then had a long conversation. He said that religion was the cause of all of the problems in the world, particularly all the wars. He simply refused to listen that the conflict in the middle east is about land and power and religion is used as a justification. It is ten years ago that I was in Israel and I was shocked to find it is a very secular country. Those of any faith are in a minority. Part of the time I was there I spent with Christians working quietly for reconciliation and understanding between those of different ethnic groups. There were many Palestinian Christians ten years ago, though many have now gone to safer places. Whatever one feels about what is happening there, one thing is very clear, Christianity cannot be blamed.

Our dialogue continued. "If God exists, why doesn't he stop these terrible things happen?" The reality was that the man I was talking with simply could not understand that God works with individual people, changing their hearts and ways of thinking and acting. That is so basic to Christianity that it amazed me that he had attended the village church school many years ago. He was grateful that education at the school had given him Christian values that he described as "being a good man and living a good life and not harming others". I said that

this showed why we had a Church of England and Bishops in the House of Lords, so that Christian values could permeate into society. I have to say I enjoyed the opportunity of this discussion very much. He told me that I had not convinced him and that he would not be coming to my establishment. I responded by saying that even if he did not believe in God, he should remember that God believes in him and in his potential. He did look dumbfounded and astonished, together with being rather relieved as I left, as if he had been trapped in an asylum for half an hour! It did amaze me that he had managed around seventy years and had clearly never really heard the basic Christian Gospel. I hope and pray that I gave him something to think about.

Confrontation that is blunt like this is not usually the British way. Yet it does happen occasionally. I have been met with anger on visits for funerals. Anger at God for taking the person away. Anger with God for letting their loved one suffer. In reality, this is anger with God for not doing what they have thought he should. More often I met the exact opposite. A thankfulness for all that God has done for the person throughout their life. This is particularly amazing when the person who has passed away is much younger than we would expect. We choose to forget that all human life hangs by a threat.

I hope that you will come and join the congregation for the **Confirmation Service on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> of October at 7.30 at Ingatestone**. Those taking this public step are two men from the Ingatestone congregation, Lee Churchett and Michael Evill and a man from the Fryerning family service congregation, Mark Morris. Also there are three children from the Ingatestone congregation, Hattie and William Baker and Heather Matthews. These will be joined by others from the congregations at the other benefice. I am sure the man I spent time with after the funeral would be amazed that people still continue to respond to the call of God upon their lives, recognizing all that he has done and continues to do for them. It is our faith that gives our lives meaning, purpose and hope.

Yours in Christ,

Patrick