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Dear friends,

I write this as I am preparing to go on retreat. A week based in Durham and visiting sites associated with 'The Northern Saints'. The programme includes attendance at many services, including early in the morning and late in the evening at the Cathedral. It should be a time of spiritual refreshment. A time to refocus on the things of God. You might think that a clergy person was the last person who needed such an activity. Surely I am immersed in the things of God all the time? Someone in the parish said to me, "sounds like a busman's holiday. You need a break from all that God stuff as well". I guess you can tell they were not a church-goer! The fact is that all of us are very busy with the everyday realities of life, whoever we are. We need a break from all the pressures associated with our daily routines. That is why we go on holiday. But where as modern holidays can often be focussed on self-indulgence, a retreat gives us time to stop and reflect. The programme usually contains space, to explore where we are in our relationship with God. Everyone needs to do that in some way.

Of course, events this summer have made many people become more introspective. When we feel in danger, there is a natural tendency to look within ourselves to find that inner strength that lets us carry on with what has to be done. That is where the faith is so important. For if the centre of your being is only concerned with your self, then there is a great emptiness. A Christian philosopher stated that we all have a God-shaped hole in our hearts that we search to fill. The problem is we can try and fill it with all kinds of things, materialism, distractions, entertaining ourselves. But, in our quietest moments, we know they are unfulfilling. In our youth confirmation classes we have been emphasising that God gives us life for a purpose. Our quest is to discover that purpose. When we have a baptism service, I remind those present that faith gives us a purpose to our life. Without it, what is the

purpose? No wonder that for many people being introspective is uncomfortable. But it can also be liberating.

It is strange how the world turns so much about religion completely on its head. We hear and read all the time that religion is an escape from reality. Exactly the opposite is the truth. Religion gives us the strength to face reality. It is our secular materialistic society that does not every want to face reality, wanting to be permanently distracted.

September brings with it the start of the new school year. One of the joys of school life is that each academic year brings with it a distinct start. The pupils know the timetable of the year and the significant event, culminating in the end of the academic year. It is all there, all predictable. Unexpected events will happen, but all in a framework. The church's year is the same. We are entering the seasons of harvest festivals, then there will be Remembrance Day, soon it will be Advent and Christmas. For many people, the pointers in the year are lost. The structure from their youth is gone. That, together with the comradeship, are one of the reasons people look fondly back to their youth. Yet this structure and sense of community are all to be found in the church.

At the Ingatestone Harvest weekend, the first weekend in October, on Saturday 1st at 3pm we have a special event at the Parish Church. Our friends from Sing Immanuel, who have been before, are joined by Tony Anthony. Tony was three times World Kung Fu Champion. On retirement from the sport, he went into working as body guard from some very dubious characters. His crimes led him to being in a notorious prison in Cyprus. His story is compelling and written in the best selling book, 'Taming the Tiger'. Come and hear Tony, sing some harvest favourites and listen to Sing Immanuel. It promises to be an uplifting afternoon.

Tony's life story is one where religious conversion suddenly gave him a sense of reality and the purpose to his life. In the busyness of your life, see if you can find the time to come and listen to him. It will give you much to reflect upon. And think about going on retreat. You need it. We all need it.

Yours in Christ, *Patrick*.