

Listening to God.

The Welland-Fosse Benefice Service, South Luffenham, 29 July 2018.

We are in Geneva, where France and Switzerland meet. To the west of the city, just beyond the airport is a vast factory of gleaming steel towers and glass structures. This is CERN – the Centre for European Nuclear Research. It employs over 3000 scientists from 38 countries.

The buildings we see from the road are as nothing compared to a vast underground circular chamber running for over 80 kilometres under the Franco-Swiss border. Through this tunnel the scientists shoot small sub-atomic particles at the speed of light in both directions, causing them to crash in spectacular fashion at regular intervals.

I am no scientist but what this research centre does is to simulate the first fraction of a second after the Big Bang – the creation of the world – in order to find more about our beginnings. In particular, they use it to find '*The Higgs Boson*' – the so called '*God Particle*' – which is responsible for the creation of matter which followed immediately afterwards. A non-scientific explanation of '*The Higgs Boson*' suggests that it is like Margaret Thatcher (whose government first sponsored the CERN project) walking into a crowded room and immediately attracting people to her presence and so forming a large lump of matter.

Along the length of the underground tunnel are 4 observation or listening stations, each one the size of a cathedral. They are packed with sophisticated equipment to observe and record the effects when these two beams of protons collide. The CERN scientists need to capture that data and find the very best collision examples which exhibit the *Higgs Boson* evidence.

These scientists are watching and waiting all around the clock to observe the familiar and predictable but also the unusual. So on 4 July 2012 they spotted the first example of *The Higgs Boson* to great applause.

The Welland-Fosse Benefice

Two years ago – almost to the day – some of us listened to this same illustration of CERN at my first ever Benefice Service. I thought it was a good model for our 5 benefice churches, all focussed on the mystery of God's presence among us. They are 'hot spots' for discerning God in our midst as we watch, pray and worship, attentive to both the familiar and the unusual. They are listening stations where God's actions are guaranteed. There have always been such 'hot-spots' in the created order since the beginning of history as we know it. God's activity is to be seen everywhere but in our churches God continues to interact with us – clashing, sparking, beckoning, caressing – as we search for a fuller understanding of the *God Particle* in our lives.

2 years on and I am still convinced that each of our 5 churches has a vital role to play in the continuing work of transforming life in Rutland. They are staffed by volunteers – not highly paid scientists – but each of us has a yearning to search for and work with that *God Particle* which he promises us.

We believe in a God who reveals himself to us in a variety of ways. *“Watch and Pray”* was the advice that Jesus gave to his disciples as together they faced their darkest moment in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Church Going.

The scientists at CERN bring an abundance of gifts to their research and our churches are peopled with folk who display a variety of abilities. We need to have our watchers and prayers; our dreamers, poets and our scientists. We cannot do without those whose faith propels them into activity: whether it be raising children, following a demanding profession or tending the gardens, the brass or the hospitality which any church requires if it is true to its name. Some our doers; some are thinkers; others are planners or catalysts yet we all have a responsibility to take advantage of this powerful presence of God called prayer. Why spend your life tacking upwind all the time? Let the spinnaker of prayer power us along! And prayer takes various forms. There are the Martha's and the Mary's – the activists and the attenders. We all need our lists of things we are passionate about to share with God. Some of us talk a lot in prayer but others feel the need to just be still.

I once came across a man just sitting in my church in Scarborough. He was on holiday and had just learned that his mum had died and this was the only building he could find which was open in which to weep. Mercifully our churches are all open. It would be good if we were to use them a bit more for that listening which is so important.

2 Years ago we had no Benefice Choir. Thank God for music and musicians! It allows us to worship God in a different register. But music depends upon silence just as much as it does on sound. Even the Church of England worship books have re- discovered the value of silence, though we don't use it as much as we should. Soon though we will have a new edition of service book which will have some prayers at the front for us to use quietly when we first come into church to prepare us for the divine encounter. We also have a contemplation group for those who prefer silent prayer with support from others. Once, a young student, walking along the banks of the river in Oxford, asked his companion, a monk, how you pray. The monk responded, 'I just fall on my knees and hope for the best'. I think most people would want a bit more support than that. So if you feel that pull towards silent prayer, remember the opportunity which the last Monday in the Month at 6pm brings us.

CERN continues to do its work on our behalf, night and day. It asks the big question 'how'. Christians around the world, in their churches and solitary spaces ask the other big question 'why'. My prayer is that each of us will be able to contribute something to the answer. Amen.