

Reflections and Prayers: Rainbows

This is the third of a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation, temporarily dispersed. They are sourced from a variety of people and places and are supplementary to the Sunday streamed services advertised in the Weekly News Update. You are invited to use them for personal reflection and to share them as you wish. Some pieces relate to the Christian calendar at the time: others are more general, and you may wish to retain them for future reference.

God said to Noah, 'I set my rainbow in the cloud'

'and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and earth.' (Genesis 9:13)

We've had the flood, Noah and his family chosen as the representative humans to survive it, the Ark built to weather the deluge, animals of all species processing in two-by-two, hatches battened down; finally the rain stops, the skies clear, the sun emerges, the waters subside, the emissary dove returns with a sign of life and a new creation begins. God makes a covenant with Noah and the people of the earth, symbolised by a rainbow set in the cloud: a new dawn. There are times when there is a great need of a rainbow, not least now, and its message is a vivid promise of better days ahead. The Ark, meanwhile, like our homes, is (as Peter Goodhall reminded us last week) the place of safety. But we look to God's rainbow in the cloud – and resurrection hope for the future.



A Rainbow

Rainbows, some, like this one, home-made, and others professionally produced, have suddenly appeared all over the nations and outposts of the UK – in house windows, on community noticeboards, on hoardings, on placards nailed to posts in gardens (instead of estate agents' signs), on oilrigs in the North Sea and on British naval vessels in undisclosed locations. You can't miss them:

you're not supposed to: they are a symbol of community solidarity with and support for NHS staff at this time of trial.

The NHS rainbow image originated in February 2019 at the Evelina Children's Hospital, part of the Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital Trust in London. It was based on the rainbow theme already adopted by the LGBT+ movement to symbolise that humanity's rich diversity, not least evident in cities such as London, is treated equally and that there shall be no barriers. It reflects that God's rainbow, set in the cloud in Genesis, marked a covenant between God and **all** the peoples of the earth.

Rainbow pictures, drawings and banners of all shapes and sizes are everywhere to be seen as the country's imagination has been fired by their colourful symbolism. We give thanks for the dedication of staff in the NHS, Care Homes and other organisations who, despite risk to themselves, will continue to care for everyone in our rainbow nation. And every Thursday evening, at 8 pm, we open our doors and windows and loudly applaud them all with enormous gratitude. Thanks be to God!

John Bell, April 2020: photo by Joan Bell, of a rainbow drawn at the request of our 11-year-old grandson

'I trace the rainbow through the rain' – a personal reflection

These words are from verse 3 of George Matheson's hymn 'O love that wilt not let me go': if you happen to have any Methodist hymnbook to hand, it's 448 in the Methodist Hymn Book (1933), 685 in Hymns & Psalms (1983) and 636 in Singing the Faith (2011): that it has survived the culls of H&P and StF (and is published in many other hymnals, always to the same familiar tune 'St Margaret') is testimony to its enduring meaning, significance and poignancy for so many people.

Born in 1842, George Matheson became a minister in the Church of Scotland, appointed to the parish of Innellan, on the west bank of the lower River Clyde from 1868 to 1886. He lost his sight at the age of 19, leading to his fiancée ending their engagement, and he relied on his sister to help him with his studies and later act as his housekeeper. On a June evening in 1882, the day of his sister's wedding in Glasgow (which he was unable to attend), he wrote the hymn and later, perhaps reflecting his own earlier heartbreak, recorded, 'I was at that time alone. I was suffering from extreme mental distress and the hymn was the fruit of my pain'. It's not difficult to understand why.

In her 2004 book 'Glorious Things: My Hymns for Life', Sally Magnusson selects this as one of her 35 favourite hymns, commenting that every time her husband, Norman, 'spots a struggling rainbow, he can be relied on to regale the company with a snatch of "O love that wilt not me go"', adding that it 'is high on the agenda at his funeral'. Sally admits that she would be happy to have it at hers too.

Day by day we are shocked at the number of people, not least in the UK, who die from coronavirus: it will take a terrible toll worldwide in a way unparalleled (in peacetime) since the outbreak of Spanish flu just over 100 years ago. Today, we take for granted superb medical facilities and care, and we have forgotten that, for earlier generations within our memory, death was common from illnesses which would now pose no threat to life. In Britain, premature death is not nearly as common as it once was, even if the coronavirus is claiming some young victims.

Now for the very personal bit, and something of my family story, which ends in the connection with George Matheson's hymn. My maternal grandfather, Robert Thompson, worked at Pegswood Colliery near Morpeth in Northumberland and he died in 1945 when I was just 3 years old: I am sad that I can't remember him as a living person. But I have his copy of the 1933 Methodist Hymn Book (with tunes), inscribed with his name and address, dated April 3rd 1934.

In chronological order, Robert and his wife Florrie (Nanna, as I knew her) lost their only son in infancy in 1912: on a corner of their gravestone in Pegswood cemetery, where my grandparents are laid to rest, there are the words 'and also a son, interred at Bothal' (which is the next village). Robert lost family members to the Spanish flu in 1919, leading to a surviving child (Maud) being adopted and brought up by her aunt and uncle (the aunt was Robert's sister, Annie, whom I remember well, and Maud was my mother's cousin, either way). In the late 1920s, my mother's sister, Olive, died at the age of 20 of heart problems – leaving my mother, Mary, the only survivor of three children. In the early 1930s, she answered a knock on the door very late one evening to a policeman, asking if this was Robert Thompson's home: he brought the devastating news that an uncle and cousin (Robert's brother and nephew) had been killed instantly in a motor-bike accident. My grandfather played the cello in a string quartet in which his brother and nephew were two of the other members. He never, ever, played his cello again. And, so etched was that painful memory in my mother's mind, motor-bikes were never allowed to be mentioned in our household, even decades later.

So it was, years before I was born, my family endured tragedy and death, as did others around them – not least in those close-knit coal-mining communities – on a scale we do not expect today and they experienced something of the suffering which afflicted George Matheson and inspired his poignant words.

My mother died in 1982 and arrangements were made for her funeral service, to include George Matheson's hymn. Only then did I learn that it had been my grandfather's and her favourite, and I gradually began to surmise why, as over many years, they had drawn great comfort, consolation and solace from its insights. Now, at this time of national crisis, as I read those words again from my grandfather's own hymnbook, they speak to us all of a certain hope for tomorrow.

'I trace the rainbow through the rain
And feel the promise is not vain,
That morn shall tearless be'.

John Bell. April 2020

Evening Prayer at a time of isolation

A candle is lit

We light this candle as a symbol of God's light, shining into our confusion, isolation and pain, drawing from it the comfort of knowing that God is with us, always.

The candle is placed in a window

We put this candle in the window, to shine the light of God's love out into the community, so that they will know that they are not forgotten.

We come together in prayer, as the body of Christ, praying for strength and hope; knowing that we are united in spirit as we meet our Living Lord, even though we cannot meet each other.

Silence

The Lord is here! His Spirit is with us!

Living God, you have created this world bringing order out of chaos and understanding out of confusion, hear us as we pray for ourselves and others in the strangeness and confusion of our lives at the moment.

Eternal Saviour,
you have walked in this world and understand our need for each other and our struggles with isolation, reassure us with your presence and help us to follow in your footsteps of healing, grace and understanding so that social distance does not mean isolation.

Life-giving Spirit,
you bring energy and commitment, strength and encouragement, kindling flames of love from sparks of hope, fill our lives and our hearts that we may continue to shine with divine love and kindle sparks of hope in others.

For the sake of your Kingdom we pray, Amen

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Note and invitation to readers

I have gathered these reflections and prayers and they include some of my own material. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com My intention is to release each edition on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week. And, I would welcome any feedback as a guide to what is helpful and appreciated and what is not. Many thanks, John

