

Reflections and Prayers: Unseen but not unknown

This is the 4th of a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to friends in many places worldwide. They are sourced from a variety of people. 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.

A prayer for Sunday morning

Loving Lord God.

We gather in this unfamiliar way in unfamiliar times.

Some of us are here because in our isolation, we long to reconnect.

We long to reconnect with each other, and though we bring our questions,
we long to reconnect with you.

In our fear, we long for hope.

We gather as lives have been turned upside down,
as livelihoods and businesses that we have built and striven for and nurtured
seem threatened - or even lost.

Some of us gather because we are curious... how can those Christians speak of a God of power **and** of love at times like these?

We pray that you would open our hearts and our minds to your words,
to your presence
and to your love.

That in our searching in honesty and truth,
we might find **you** reaching out to **us**.

We ask that we might find that to be true.

We ask it, in the name of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Revd Andrew Emison (adapted) prayer from streamed worship for Frodsham and Norley Methodist Churches on March 29th 2020

The Physics Lab, Heaton Grammar School, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, circa 1959

J H D Walton was one of my physics teachers in the 6th form and a Methodist local preacher. He began an experiment one morning by placing a drawing board on the edge of a laboratory bench (60% on the bench, 40% overhanging the edge) and invited the lower 6th to suggest what might prevent the board from falling off if the overhanging edge were thumped hard with a fist. (Got the picture?) Our tentative response was a pile of heavy books perhaps or that a particularly overweight lad should sit on the end of the board still on the bench, supposing we could get him up. Mr Walton smiled benignly (as teachers can do when scholars expose their ignorance) and, reaching in his desk drawer for yesterday's edition of the daily Newcastle Journal, came up with the stunning alternative that a single sheet of his broadsheet newspaper, laid across the part of the drawing board on the bench, would do the job perfectly. None of us believed him. But he thumped the exposed end of the board with his fist and it didn't budge; then he invited his bemused and hapless pupils to try the same, and, to our collective astonishment, with the same effect. (Try it at home – it does work!)

He enquired of us why this was. Silence – nay, admiration, disbelief. What hidden powers does this man have? [Just as an aside, one of the chemistry teachers, Mr Miller, was a member of the Magic Circle, which perhaps accounted for bits of organic chemistry – benzene rings and so on: we wondered if there might be a connection.] Mr Walton announced, triumphantly, that it was the

downward air pressure on the newspaper which exceeded the force of the thumping fists, or words to that effect.

Science is a good thing, as we are learning day by day right now.

We couldn't see the air pressure, neither could Mr Walton, but he knew it was there: unseen, but not unknown.



Appearances can be deceptive

Joan and I are immensely privileged to enjoy this rural view from the back of our home in Cuddington. Of course it varies with the seasons, but, as we have looked out in recent weeks, nothing really seems different. The garden birds fly by, a heron alights near the pond across the field, buds on trees and bushes burst forth to proclaim that Spring is here again. Everything looks normal. You wouldn't know that anything has changed. But it has: the invisible threat of the unexpected coronavirus is in

our midst and we don't know how long it will last: it, too, is unseen but not unknown.

Appearances can be unexpected

We are in the period between Easter and Ascension when the disciples – women and men – encountered the risen Jesus in ways which were beyond their understanding, let alone ours. As E P Sanders puts it in his book, *The historical figure of Jesus*, 'Much about the historical Jesus will remain a mystery. Nothing is more mysterious than the stories of his resurrection, which attempt to portray an experience that the authors could not themselves comprehend'.

Despite the divergent accounts – exactly when, where and to whom? – we might safely imagine that all Jesus' appearances were unexpected and breathtaking in their impact; to the grieving Mary Magdalene in the garden, to the terrified disciples (without Thomas) in the locked room, to the doubting Thomas next time, to the rueful pair on the road to Emmaus, to the fishing disciples on the beach. Yet each, in its own way, reinforced the unique message that Jesus is not just a historical figure with some claim to a peripheral role in Jewish religion but the centre of a new, nascent Easter faith: as someone succinctly put it, 'there would have been no gospel but for Easter'. The Christian Church of twenty centuries, despite its human failings, is testament to the supreme conviction of those tense and tentative early disciples that Jesus was, and indeed is, somehow, alive.

Jesus said to Thomas and the disciples, 'blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe'; and that includes all of us. Jesus is unseen but not unknown.

Unseen, but not unknown – so where does that phrase come from?

The answer is, from a hymn by an American Congregational minister Ray Palmer (Methodist Hymn Book 111, but not in H&P or StF), written in 1858, which begins 'Jesus, these eyes have never seen that radiant form of thine'. It is based on 1 Peter 1: 8 (do look it up) and verse 4 reads;

'Yet, though I have not seen, and still must rest in faith alone;
I love thee, dearest Lord, and will, unseen but not unknown.'

Evening Prayer



Eternal and loving Lord, as each day draws to its end, the evening light now lasts longer: the sun stays higher in the sky until it gradually sinks away in the west, shadows lengthen and darkness finally beckons us into another night.

Before the end of the day, we bring our prayers for others – seen and unseen, known and unknown.

Be still; picture all those you know; imagine those you don't know; pause for each one; don't rush; you have plenty of time.

We pray for and with;

- Our own family members, near and far
- Friends, neighbours, colleagues, helpers
- Children and young people, wondering when school, college or university will resume
- Those who are isolated, vulnerable, anxious, fearful
- Those whose employment is on hold, their livelihoods threatened
- Those who are unwell, suffering from coronavirus or other illnesses
- Those denied vital treatment while medical resources are diverted
- Those who mourn the loss of a loved one or friend

- Those of our church family and communities who arrange and offer spiritual, pastoral and practical support
- Front-line staff in the NHS, in care homes, in hospices, in other health-care organisations and those who supply and support them
- Staff in local stores and supermarkets ensuring that our essential daily needs can be met

- The government of our nation, their medical, scientific and other advisors, charged with huge responsibilities we can barely imagine

- And others we bring to mind, known only to each of us

We pray in the name of Jesus. Amen.

Candle photo by Martin Bell (2017), garden photo by Joan Bell and text John Bell April 2020

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.

Many thanks, John