

Reflections and Prayers – responding to the crisis – loneliness and fear

This is the 12th in a series of weekly Reflections and Prayers being offered to the Norley Methodist Church congregation and to colleagues and friends in many places near and far. They are kindly sourced by many people. You are invited to use them freely for personal reflection and to share and retain them as you wish.

Introduction

Human emotions of loneliness and fear are often intertwined: sometimes loneliness leads to fear, but also fear can precede loneliness. This week's thoughts touch on both and reflect, from different perspectives, on God's eternal presence as we continue to wrestle with the pandemic – an unparalleled global event in our lifetime.

As I write this in mid-June, some features of the lockdown have been or are being lifted, to benefit some people but not all. Some still yearn for a 'new normal' of human interaction which remains on the horizon, not least a return to worship in their local church. But perhaps the most tragic aspect of lockdown has been the lonely deaths of loved ones, denied the tender comfort of families at the end, surrounded only by the caring but frightening sight of medical staff in full PPE who must seem like aliens from another planet.



Separation

Nothing can fill the gap when we are away from those we love, and it would be wrong to try and find anything. We must simply hold out and win through. That sounds very hard at first, but at the same time it is a great consolation, since leaving the gap unfilled preserves the bond between us. It is nonsense to say that God fills the gap; God does not fill it, but keeps it empty so that our communion with one another may be kept alive, even at the cost of pain.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer

'Fear not, for I am with you: be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you, yes, I will help you,' (Isaiah 41:10)

(Have a bible to hand if you wish to look up the references as you read this reflection.)

Loneliness visits us when we are vulnerable, it whispers doubts about who we are, or who we are not, that we have no friends, that we are not really known by anyone or valued, that nobody really cares or they would have '.....!'; you fill in the blanks. It is no respecter of age, circumstance, position, achievements, sickness or grief, and it usually has a few side-kicks with it such as fear, anxiety, worthlessness, self-pity, anger, or whatever will compound the feeling. These are the 'thoughts', ideas and little lies that visit our minds when we are vulnerable, the ones that cause us to 'feel' so horrible and give us a gnawing in the pit of our stomachs. It can be hard to shake off and makes it difficult to find, and believe Jesus' words, or feel we truly belong in our church or community or are valued by our friends and loved ones. It can all feel so real and hopeless, particularly at a time of isolation when fear is being brought into our homes through the many forms of 'news'.

Just as we can't always control who or what comes through our front door, we can't always stop thoughts occurring or flitting across our minds. However, we do have a choice about what stays and who makes themselves at home in our house and we have the same choice with our minds. Not by trying to stop it or send them away, or trying harder to 'do' better, to 'pull ourselves together' or denying how we feel, but by filling our thoughts and minds with truth, displacing what we don't want with what we do want, by the truths God has given us in His word. *(Isaiah 26:3, Romans 12:2)*

The beautiful truth that is tangible is Jesus, the one who has experienced all that we go through, who knew we weren't very good at all this, so made provision for us and came to show us just how much He and His Father love us. From the very beginning they knew it wasn't good for us to be on our own, that we needed each other,

as well as a friend and a Father we could completely rely on - Jesus and Father God. We were all created for connection, to belong to each other, to navigate life with each other. This is why isolation is so difficult for us. (1 *Corinthians 12:13, Genesis 2:18*)

Remember our Father God knew each one of us before we were born, He made us and He doesn't make mistakes, He made us individual, unique and 'wonderfully complex'! (*Psalms 139*) He knows us, values us, understands us, sees us; He listens to us and has time for us. (*Psalms 116*)

Jesus came and called us His friends, that's right, even when no one else is around, Jesus is our friend. (*John 15:15*) Not only that but He knew us so well that He knew we would need more than a book to read about Him and His Father, so when we believe who Jesus is, He gives us His Spirit to live inside us, the Holy Spirit who is our helper, comforter, teacher, counsellor who also reveals the bible to us. That's a bit of God inside of us to be closer than any human person, someone who knows us literally inside out from conception through eternity and still loves us, helps us, comforts us and prays for us. (*John 14:16, Romans 8:26*)

Our Father God is longing to be close to us, to fill us with His peace and hope and joy. To spend time with us, His children whom He loves. It's as easy as turning our focus, turning our heart towards Him, talking to Him in whatever way we find easiest, sharing what's going on and how we feel, being honest and believing what He says. (*James 4:8, Romans 15:13*) He promises to comfort us, through His Holy Spirit, through the truths in His word, through people He puts in our lives, through His ever present, unshakable love. (2 *Corinthians 7:6, Romans 8:39, Psalms 94:19*)

As I have found God to be so faithful, gentle and kind, I pray that in these unusual times we can each discover new depths of the closeness, love and comfort of our God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - who promises to cast out all our fears.

Pamela Gates, June 2020. A native of Norley, Pamela served in the NHS as a qualified nurse for 35 years, recently completed 3 years at Bible School and plans to serve with a Missions organisation for disadvantaged children in Mozambique.

'Faith is like the bird that sings whilst it is still dark'

This quote which I came across many years ago is one that strikes a chord whenever I experience a dark time in my life and the life of others.

I am an enthusiastic follower of the wonder of the natural world. Indeed, in these times of lockdown and social distancing the closeness of nature's gifts is particularly precious. We are fortunate; the view from our living room window extends across a Derbyshire dale to a rising hillside of meadow and pasture lands. Cattle and sheep, with their lambs, graze; rabbits and the occasional brown hare scuttle about. Black fallow deer roam and a fox family can sometimes be seen. The hedgerows are alive with birds. Butterflies and bees take sweet nectar from the wild flowers. Watching the countryside come to life after the darkness of the Winter I am heartened to know the Creator God. If you can capture this experience, I hope it helps you to keep the faith which is like the bird that sings whilst it is still dark.

2019, near Matlock, Derbyshire



Photo by Joan Bell,

Whilst the foregoing experience is mine, and will be the same for some, I know it is not everyone's. For some people being in lockdown is being trapped within an environment where there is little to see or enjoy. Maybe even the reassuring hug of a loved family member or friend is not possible. Fear can be an overwhelming emotion. For those who live in this enforced isolation, freedom and hope can be hard to find.

Jesus said, 'Do not be afraid, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, and you are mine'. Recall the words of the angel to Mary at the empty tomb, 'Do not be afraid'. In her isolation and fear these words of consolation assured Mary of a truth we need to now. The risen Christ is with us, even to the close of the age.

Like the bird that sings whilst it is still dark let us have that faith that the sun will rise, light will shine and the darkness will not overcome it.

Revd David Glasson, May 2020. David is a retired minister living near Matlock in Derbyshire.

Prayers

God of all times and all places,
we pray for those who are in difficulty on life's journey, especially at this time:

- those who are searching for meaning;
- those who are lonely and have found themselves in dark places;
- those who are worried, confused and fearful;
- those who see no hope.

God of the journey,
we pray for all who try to walk alongside:

- those who provide physical support;
- those who hold the hands of the dying;
- those who listen;
- those who can find the right words;
- those who bring hope.

God of all life,
we pray that you will help us to know you in our journeying;
be our inspiration and our hope,
and hold us when we lose sight of you.
In the name of Jesus Christ,
Amen.

The prayer, to which I have made a few small additions, was prepared by Andrew and the Revd Anne Brown as part of a 'service at home' for the Nidd Valley Circuit, North Yorkshire, April 2020. Before Anne entered ministry, she and Andrew were members at Wesley in Chester and, recently retired, they now live in Harrogate.

Final thoughts

*'In these uncertain times we know you might feel unsure.....
But flowers still grow, birds still sing, and waves still sweep the shore.
And with the rising and setting of the sun, nature reminds us all that brighter days will come.'*

A National Trust advertisement, May 2020.



Sunrise, somewhere

'The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it'

RSV, the Gospel according to John 1:5

Note and encouragement to all readers

I have collected and compiled these reflections and prayers, including some of my own thoughts. If you wish to offer pieces for inclusion in future weeks, please send them to me at johnabell@supanet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

Any hymns are referenced from their most recent publication in a British Methodist hymn book (Singing the Faith – StF, Hymns and Psalms – H&P, or even the 1933 Methodist Hymnbook – MHB) and, for URC readers, in Rejoice and Sing (R&S), the URC's present hymnal.