

Reflections and Prayers for Conference Sunday

This is the 13th 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.

What might have been?

The theme of these Reflections for May 24th – Wesley Day – was ‘what might have been?’ This Sunday, June 28th, is Conference Sunday, when representative Methodists from these isles, led by their newly inducted President (this year, the Revd Richard Teal) and Vice-President (Carolyn Lawrence), with their friends and families, guests from churches in other countries, from other UK denominations and many others, would have gathered in joyous morning worship, solemnly received ministerial ordinands into ‘Full Connexion’ and, later in the day, attended magnificent Ordination Services. Not this year; the induction of the Presidency and the reception into Full Connexion will take place in some form, but the Ordination Services will be deferred until later in the year.

Some of us – I write as a former Vice-President – would have attended the opening of the Conference on Saturday at the Telford International Centre, beginning with Charles Wesley’s hymn ‘And are we yet alive?’ (see next piece). Alas, not this year, at Telford, that is. So much is not now possible, for the moment at least.

In January, Methodist people shared in their annual Covenant Service – that very distinctive liturgical contribution the Methodist Church offers to ecumenical endeavour – in which the promises they made had unforeseen consequences and unexpected outcomes, as Margaret Lee’s personal meditation explores.



The ministers we now call presbyters, like all others before them, are ordained to the ministry of word and sacrament, with the particular privilege within the Methodist Church to preside at Holy Communion, an integral part of the Covenant and Ordination Services as well as being celebrated throughout the year in Sunday worship: Ken Howcroft offers us an ever-thoughtful reflection on ‘Holy Communion in a time of coronavirus’.

These thoughts of uplifting Methodist occasions are bound by the common theme that what we usually do together in each other’s company, sitting comfortably side by side with no thought of social distancing (the phrase hadn’t been invented five months ago), we now do uneasily at a short distance or miles apart or not at all. It’s not the same – let’s not beat about the bush – and, despite the innovations of technology, we are missing something imperative about our collective and corporate being as part of God’s people of faith.

John Bell, June 2020. Photo of the Conference of 2019, at the NEC, Birmingham, being prepared for its formal Opening by the Revd Ruth Gee, Assistant Secretary of the Conference.

And are we yet – alive and/or on-line?

Charles Wesley’s words (StF 456, verses 1, 2 and 6 only are printed), published in 1749, have been sung, unaccompanied, at the beginning of the Methodist Conference for as long as anybody can remember.

I am indebted to Ken Jackson for drawing to my attention an alternative, contemporary version compiled on May Day 2020, emanating from Wesley House, Cambridge: three of the five verses are printed.

The rousing doxology at the end was added to Wesley’s version in 1876: ‘Praise ye the Lord, Alleluia!’

And are we yet alive,
and see each other's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
for his redeeming grace!

What troubles have we seen,
what conflicts have we passed,
fightings without and fears within,
since we assembled last!

Let us take up the cross,
till we the crown obtain;
And gladly reckon all things loss,
so we may Jesus gain.

And are we yet on-line
and see each other's face?
Glory and praise to Jesus give
for electronic means of grace!

What troubles have we seen
in this pandemic's power?
But thanks to Zoom we still can be
connected for an hour.

Then shall we start to prove
Our new, new normal way;
And travel on in faith and love
Into the dawning day.

Holy Communion in a time of Coronavirus: a rambling confession

What I miss at the moment is Communion. In general, I miss the ability to be with family, friends and others in the 'here' of physical space as well as the 'now' of phone calls, video calls, internet chats and digital meetings. I also miss that in worship. Yet as the current [in May] Vice-President of the Methodist Conference, Prof. Clive Marsh, has noted, for many people (including people who do not normally 'go to church') online worship has sometimes felt more 'real' and added a new depth to what used to happen on a Sunday or in other experiences of face-to-face worship. He says, "The Holy Spirit is really real, even whilst not visible, and yet seems very active as people connect 'virtually'." That has been the experience of some of my oldest friends who have been taking part in on-line worship for many years, and who say that there is research that many others react similarly.

I have to admit that I know what they mean. Yet I could not worship that way all the time. When we talk about what is 'really real' or the 'real presence' of Christ among us, the words 'really' and 'real' come from a Latin word that describes what we might call the 'thingy-ness' of things. So, from time to time I need to experience the 'body-ness' of things. That is where Holy Communion (the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, the Mass – call it what you will) comes in. As the Revd Dr Colin Morris once said, Jesus did not command us to think this or believe that about it, but just to do it. Yet amongst all the other things that can be said about Communion, one that is increasingly important for me as the years roll by is the recognition that the bread and wine are the visible signs of the virtual reality of the body of Christ. In our here-and-now they re-present to us his body and blood which, through both crucifixion and resurrection, Jesus gave in self-sacrificial love for us, a love and new way of living that he invites us to share with him. So, at the same time, as we share the bread and wine we too, in a related sense, become the body of Christ for the world in which we live.

Heavy stuff, I know. I am sorry. But it starts to explain why I am strangely reluctant to solve my problem at the moment by conducting my own Communion services. Communion is at the heart of my worship, my spirituality, my discipleship and my ministry. I may have become a supernumerary last summer, but I am still an ordained presbyter (minister of word and sacrament) in full connexion with the Methodist Conference; and the Conference ordained me "to preside at the celebration of the sacrament of Christ's body and blood". Just before I retired, I was asked what I would choose if the Conference only allowed me to do one thing in the future, and I replied, "Preside at Communion".

Yet in lockdown, I cannot bring myself to do it. It is partly because it would feel odd without some other embodiment of the body of Christ as well as my wife being with me. It is partly because although there can be profound experiences of the presence of Christ in a private place, or an upper room locked for fear of the world and the representatives of its authorities, or the Archbishop of Canterbury's kitchen, they can also occur in times and places that are public, in a space set apart in the world for worship; and it is these latter that I am missing.



As I have wrestled with this strange mixture of feelings, and with the other aspects of these times in which we live, I have found that some parts of the Easter stories in the Bible have caught my attention for the first time, or taken on new resonance. One is the story of Mary Magdalene. In Matthew, Mark and Luke she and other women go to the tomb, and Mark and Luke tell us that they were looking for Jesus's body in order to anoint it. John (20:11) says that Mary stays at the tomb asking anyone she can ask where Jesus's body is. When she turns and sees Jesus raised to life, she does not recognise him. She has to recognise that the body of Christ has taken on a new form in its new life.

I too have to learn to see the body of Christ in unexpected places and new ways. Christ is always with us. But sometimes we concentrate so much on those other members of his body who are in the room with us that we do not recognise all the other members of Christ's body throughout this world, and also throughout time and eternity who are also with us. Charles Wesley's hymns are full of the idea that we pray, worship and sing with all God's people in this world and the next, and with the angels. They also recognise that those choirs are there and help us to join in with them when we are on our own or find praying and worshipping hard. Having to do without people's physical presence at the moment means that I have to learn again to see and appreciate all of them!

Through doing without the bread and wine at times, I am also having to learn just how important communion with the crucified and raised Christ is. In Mark 14:25 (and parallels in Matthew and Luke) Jesus says that he will not drink wine with his followers until the kingdom of God comes. In at least one sense, the kingdom does start to come with his resurrection, and he shares table fellowship again. But the pain of abstinence is part of the story as well. For me, that is more important than bringing my own food to an on-line party.

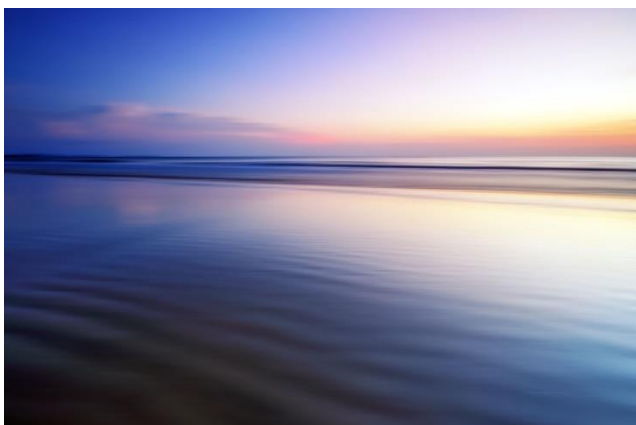
Revd Ken Howcroft, former President of the Methodist Conference, now retired to Lichfield, May 2020.

Meditation 'Let me be employed for you or laid aside for you'

Lord, it seems only a short time since we said these words, all of us, gathered together to renew our Covenant with you. Most of us were going along quite nicely, hoping it wouldn't be us who were laid aside this year. And now.....? We're all laid aside – from worship, from fellowship, from our plans, and from our hopes. Why? Why all of us? What does it mean and when will it end? After all, I thought plagues were an Old Testament thing, or in Eyam! *[see note below]*

We were in the middle of our tasks, our ministry, our vocations. Now all has been interrupted. Our structures have gone, not least Sunday worship, the lynchpin of our week. Doesn't that only happen to persecuted Christians? It feels like we have lost so much, the sacredness of Communion, the anticipation of Easter worship and Lent courses interrupted. There are no events to act as boundaries between this week and next week, this month and the next. What are we supposed to do now? What about the moments of inspiration we've recently had which might have taken us an important step forward in our service to you? It's the back burner for those I suppose.

Then, in the midst of all the anxiety, frustration and bewilderment, I hear other words, like the 'gentle whisper' to Ezekiel:



"When you pass through the waters I will be with you...for I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour." (*Isaiah 43: 2-3*)

And "If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast." (*Psalms 139: 9-10*)

And "The Lord will keep you from all harm. He will watch over your life." (*Psalms 121: 7*)

I hear the 'gentle whisper' nudging my senses to deal with this so unexpected situation. I will learn to appreciate the little things that we miss when we rush from one activity to the next, like the detail of a flower's petals, cloud formations when I look skywards, the ripple of water flowing through a dale and the scent of herbs. I will really be able to listen to this Spring's birdsong for nature won't stand still and seasons will still move in their familiar tracks. It is we who have the challenge of stepping outside our comfort zone to find new ways of relating, like the joy of phone conversations we wouldn't otherwise have had. We will find new ways of worshipping too, silent and less public ways but secure in the knowledge of those threads which still bind us together and to you. Teach us new ways to be still and experience your peace. One day we hope to return to those familiar paths and to pick up our plans and get on, but for now....



"He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside quiet waters. He restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake". (*Psalm 23: 2-3*)
Amen

Margaret Lee, Swanwick, Derbyshire, composed a few weeks ago, but still so relevant.

[*Note: for readers unfamiliar with the history of Eyam, Derbyshire, the Great Plague of London reached it in 1665 in a bundle of flea-infested cloth, causing widespread death in the village. The brave decision and actions of the rector, William Mompesson, organising Eyam to isolate itself for several months, saved the plague's spread elsewhere; those villagers made the ultimate, heroic sacrifice.*]

Prayer for now and later

God of connection and relationship,
we thank you for the gift of the internet
that at this time of isolation,
through these virtual means,
we can be in touch
with people we love and miss dearly.

But we ask you also to remind us
that your incarnation is about flesh and blood,
here and now, presence and promise
in the world of physical bodies and bones.

So forgive us if we are using our on-line presence
on twitter, email, youtube and instagram
as an anaesthetic to ease the grief we feel
for not being able to hold each other,
sing together, feast together.

Forgive us for the obsession of wanting likes,
of checking data, of escalating angst,
of sharing our fears and small dramas,
of believing what we are told on-line is true
without taking a reality check.

Thank you for giving us the internet
as a means of being together for now,
but one day, let us put it down, turn it off,
silence and pause it, see it for what it is,
so that we can once again
look into each other's eyes,
touch each other's hands,
dance together on this solid ground,
dip our bread into a common communion cup
and know your profound and real presence
in this beautiful and terrifying world.

Revd Dr Barbara Glasson, April 2020. Barbara is the President of the Conference 2019-20, passing the Cross, symbol of the office, to the Revd Richard Teal on Saturday June 27th.

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.