

Reflections and Prayers – responding to the crisis – isolation and dependence

This is the 14th 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.

The paradox of solitude

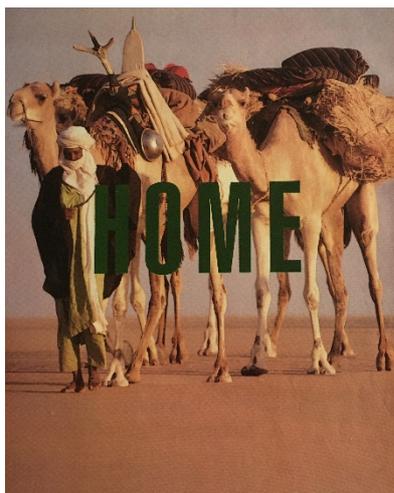
This reflection revolves around the connected ideas and paradoxes of loneliness, isolation and solitude. As you read and look at the pictures, imagine how the people might feel.



Prins Christian Sund is a 60-mile waterway of narrow, interconnected fjords across the southern tip of Greenland, separating the southern archipelago from the mainland. On its shore, the hamlet of Aappilattoq, population 100, is accessible only from the water, though there is a helipad for emergencies: there are no roads into the immediate and forbidding mountains as there are no inland settlements. This is an isolated fishing community; their nearest neighbours are 20 miles away by fjord, a smaller hamlet of 66 people; in summer they watch icebergs and the occasional cruise ship float by; winters are long, dark and cold.

Photo by Joan Bell, July 2018, in Prins Christian Sund: the village community is on the shore to the extreme left.

Then there is Pitcairn Island, midway across the 7500-mile Pacific Ocean, settled in 1790 by the survivors of the *Bounty* led by Fletcher Christian, with a population now of less than 50; a ship plying between Auckland (New Zealand) and Panama calls monthly in each direction with supplies. Tragically, its isolation proved an ideal cover for child sexual abuse, eventually leading to the charging and conviction, in 2004, of six men, nearly one-third of the adult male population.



In 1992, a company advertisement sought to highlight the paradox of being at **home** and **lost** in these powerful images of people with their belongings: the Bedouin with his camels entirely at home in the desert, the lady with her shopping trolley totally lost in the city.

Or think of monastic communities, based in cultured western nations, rooted in Christian tradition, but isolating themselves from the outside, secular world for most purposes and seeking to be self-sufficient. People live in these communities for many years.



By contrast, think of round-the-world yachters, lone Atlantic rowers and trekkers to the North and South Poles; their journeys may be short term but they are hazardous and potentially life-threatening.

These images reveal that isolation does not always mean loneliness, though sometimes it does, and that you can be both isolated and lonely in a crowded place. Is loneliness at its darkest when you are surrounded by people having fun, and you feel isolated? Aristotle argued that, thanks to the gift of language, humankind is destined to be social; but the instinct to socialise is balanced by an occasional urge to withdraw into solitude. People do

need people, but not all the time. Solitude can be a blessing, but, if it drifts into loneliness, a curse; loneliness and solitude are not the same, but they overlap. Isolation, indeed, is used as a punishment for prisoners held in solitary confinement: they are not supposed to enjoy it. Solitude, on the other hand, is a blessing when it offers relief from life's pressures, as people have found at this time, relieved of the treadmill of daily commuting.

A columnist in *The Sunday Times*, on May 17th 2020, confessed that he had attempted to persuade his elderly mother, who lives in an Oxfordshire village, to move to London, to be nearer more people, shops and theatres (which she loves): she adamantly refused on the grounds that she would miss her garden, was well catered for locally and (crucially) she said, 'I don't want to see more people'. The columnist admitted that he was wrong and his mother remains in Oxfordshire, content and safer from the pandemic too.

This anecdote reveals something of human nature which has become evident in recent months, namely, that we have all responded to lockdown in different ways, sometimes related to our circumstances, but also dependent on our personalities; it may have been a blessing or a curse or a mixture of both. Moreover, supporting other people has demanded sensitivity to their needs and feelings as well as being well-intentioned. The danger is that those who regard it mainly as a curse may imagine that everyone else does so too: on the contrary, many see it as a blessing and are content. It is ironic that, through a virus carried across the world by human sociability, more people are experiencing both the blessing and the curse of solitude.

However, whether we are content or frustrated, one thing is beyond contradiction: we are all, in so many ways, dependent on others, including, in their contrasting ways, the isolated communities of Greenland and Pitcairn Island, the Bedouin tribespeople and city homeless, monastic communities, leading-edge explorers, record-breakers and *The Sunday Times* columnist's mother.

John Bell, July 2020.

Depending on the goodness of people

Early in May 2020, *The Guardian* published an extract of a book by Rutger Bregman, a Dutch historian and author, in which he surveys history and concludes that, although there is much evidence to the contrary, most people are basically good. Before coming to this conclusion Bregman had been among those who thought that human beings were inherently selfish, greedy and lazy.

Interviewed about his background (his father is a Protestant minister and his mother a special needs teacher) Bregman said he remembered as a student losing interest in questions about Christian dogma and being more concerned about the effect religious belief has on believers. "Back then there were all these books being published by famous atheist writers with subtitles like 'How Religion Poisons Everything'... And I was like, you guys have got to meet my parents. This is clearly wrong."

One of the fascinating events he relates in support of his argument is of a group of six Tongan boys who in 1965, bored with life at their boarding school, 'borrowed' a fishing boat and set sail. A huge storm blew up, the sail was torn to shreds, the rudder broke and they drifted helplessly. On the eighth day they spotted 'Ata, a tiny island, but it was dark by the time the boat was driven by the waves towards the shore and they struggled onto land. "We were very happy, but the first thing we did, we say a prayer, thank God for what he brought us to," recalled Sione Totau, now 73 and living in Australia, in a recent interview. What impressed Bregman was that, unlike the fictional *Lord of the Flies*, the real-life shipwrecked boys learned to cooperate, drawing up a rota for food, fire, kitchen and guard duties. Their days began and ended with a song and a prayer.



They tried to construct a raft to leave the island but it fell apart in the crashing waves only yards from the beach. It was to be 15 months before the smoke from their fire was spotted by those on a passing ship and they were able to return to Tonga and their families. Totau makes

clear that it was not fun: isolated, with no knowledge of where they were, unable to see their families, their future uncertain.

In some ways their experience is one to which many of us can relate, living in isolation from loved ones, relying on others and facing an uncertain future. What we have learnt from the Covid-19 pandemic is how dependent we are upon others for our well-being and care, our safety and our necessities; how grateful we should be for those who show kindness and generosity to us; how important it is that we cooperate with one another. There has been much evidence of the goodness of the people around us.

As we face the uncertainties that lie ahead, may we give thanks for those concerned for our well-being (including front-line workers of many kinds), pray for those tasked with making decisions that affect us all (including politicians and scientists) and ask for ourselves the grace that we may:

Be of good courage.
Hold fast that which is good.
Render to no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the fainthearted.
Support the weak.
Help the afflicted.
Show love to everyone. Amen.

Revd Roger Cresswell, May 2020: Roger, now retired near Lichfield, was Chair of the London South-East District prior to the formation of the London District in 2006. The book he quotes is 'Humankind: A Hopeful History'.

'O love that wilt not let me go'

John's Gospel 14: 20 "On that day you will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you."

These words come from chapter 14 of John's Gospel – one of the best loved chapters in the Bible. The setting is the upper room and the words are spoken during the last supper that Jesus shared with his disciples. They are sometimes described as the legacy of Jesus to troubled hearts; "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you". In the next chapter Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete". How we long for that joy and peace in the loneliness of our present isolation but we must beware!

To seek joy and peace as ends in themselves is good but it is less than the best. The promise of Jesus is a gift which is far greater and more wonderful. His legacy is the promise of a living relationship with God – a relationship of deep trust, of a growing love and a willing obedience. It is out of these that joy and peace, happiness and contentment grow and deepen in us.



Some years ago, Vivienne and I visited Cyprus. During our visit we went to a small village off the tourist trail and high in the mountains. We went into the tiny Orthodox village church and sat for a while. As we sat there, we witnessed a constant stream of villagers coming in and out of the church. It was just part of life – like Jacob's ladder with its constant traffic between earth and heaven. It spoke to us of a living relationship and a natural and deep devotion finding its expression in the routines of everyday life.

Coronavirus has made us all much more aware of the vulnerability of our lives and our dependence on each other. May it also make us more aware of our need for God and more aware of God's longing for us to know a love that will not let us go. So may the promise of Jesus be realised in each one of us that today "you will know that I am in my Father and you in me, and I in you".

May the peace and joy of knowing God and trusting in God's love be yours.

O love that wilt not let me go,

I rest my weary soul in thee:

I give thee back the life I owe,
that in thine ocean depths its flow
may richer, fuller be.

Yorkshire, served as Chair of the Cumbria District for many years, and is, of course our (Frodsham and Norley) minister Andrew's father.

George Matheson (which featured in week 3's Reflections about rainbows) StF 636 and R&S 511 (verse 1).

Revd David Emison, May 2020, reflection on the gospel reading for May 17th. David, now retired in North

Photo of Agioi Akindinoi, a typical small Orthodox Church in Cyprus.

Prayer at the end of the day

Loving God, as we approach the time of rest and sleep, we remind ourselves of your unconditional and abiding love for us, day after day, night after night, your love which never leaves us.

We thank God for the blessings of this day:

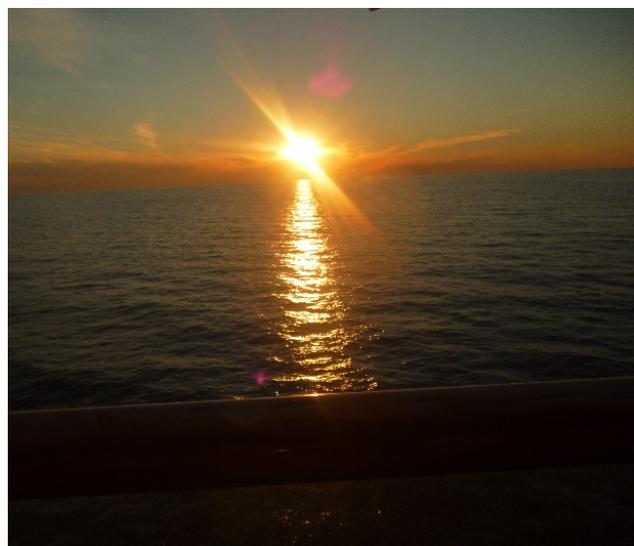
- For times of activity, perhaps a walk, a shopping trip, a drive somewhere, some gardening, reading, craft work or even washing and ironing;
- For moments of quiet, relaxation and contemplation;
- For the unexpected phone-call, text, card or email, expressing the hope that we're safe and well;
- For the casual chat with a neighbour over the fence or across the street;
- For the visit of family or friends, if we and they are permitted;
- For the kindness of strangers – the post and delivery people, the window cleaner and others who gently enquire, 'are you ok?';
- And for other people and personal moments we bring to mind.



We bring before God our concerns and worries for loved ones, friends, and ourselves:

- For those who struggle with illness and incapacity at this time;
- For those who don't understand why normal life is no longer;
- For those who still feel lonely or isolated, despite offers of support;
- For those who have lost their jobs, their income, their dignity;
- For those who fear going out again, back to school or work;
- For those who struggle with their mental health, uncertain about the present, let alone the future;
- And for other people and situations we bring to mind.

We offer these and all our prayers in the name of Jesus.
Amen.



John Bell, July 2020. Photos by John Bell, September 2010, of Tynemouth pier and lighthouse – 'O that we were there' – and by Joan Bell, July 2017, a brilliant sunset in the Baltic Sea heading for Tallinn, Estonia.

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.