

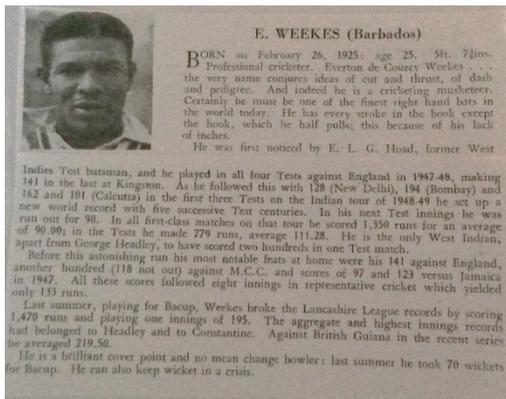
## Reflections and Prayers: Time to Talk of God

This is the 15<sup>th</sup> 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.

### Now is the time

So many strands of thought are buzzing around in my head right now, connected by the idea of 'the right time', the propitious moment. I will try to unravel them as an introduction to the three reflections which follow.

Starting with cricket. The time has finally come for the first cricket match of the season, a test match, West Indies v England, played to an empty stadium in Southampton. Ah, summer is with us after all; there is the sound of leather on willow (mainly when the West Indies are batting); and rain has stopped play. As an 8-year-old, I sat on



the wooden benches at the Ashbrooke cricket ground, Sunderland in July 1950 watching the mighty West Indies play Durham (then a Minor County, but it gave the North-East a chance to see the touring team) and by mid-August they had defeated England 3-1 in the test series. The death last week, at the age of 95, of Everton Weekes, one of the three 'W's – Frank Worrell and Clyde Walcott were the others who comprised the ubiquitous batting trio who could destroy any bowling attack – brought back memories of that day just 70 years ago: but Everton Weekes's death has come at a time when other, more profound, but related memories are being evoked. Ironically, he was so named because his father, in 1920s Barbados, followed one of Liverpool's football teams.

Now, to Michael Holding's compelling, impassioned plea for education to combat racism in society, in sport, in all walks of life; and we remind ourselves, still, in parts of the church. He was one of the unplayable fast bowlers of the rampant West Indian team that thrashed England 5-0 in the 1984 test match series. The time has come, perhaps more forcibly than ever before following George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis, to confront the insidious evils of racism and discrimination of all kinds across the world, not least in Britain.

It was a privilege, in June 2005 at Torquay, to chair the first business session of the Methodist Conference (I had just been inducted as its Vice-President) which included the presentation of a new report 'Time to Talk of God'. 'Perceptive, down-to-earth and in touch' (so said the Revd Dr Neil Richardson, a former President), it encouraged Methodist people to believe that 'discipleship will be expressed and lived out in the ordinary life of the world' and suggested ways to talk of God. It has much to tell us at this time.

In different ways, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic has renewed the world's interest in talking of God, as Ken Howcroft's 'Psalm of Lament and Praise' reminded us in the 11<sup>th</sup> of these Reflections: God can be an easy target for cause and blame. But there is always a time to talk of God, even if not the inclination. In times of crisis, people reach out beyond themselves, perhaps to a God whom they don't acknowledge or even think exists, let alone worship in any conscious sense.

Which brings us to the time to share in streamed worship via you-tube, a new experience for us all, which manifestly reaches out to a wider community than the regular churchgoers. Is this God's wake-up call to the faithful, not that they should abandon their bedrock of Christian worship and what is right for them, but that they can also find new, unwonted ways of enabling others to talk of God too?

In the timeless passage from Ecclesiastes, Margaret Lee reminds us that there is a time for everything; and sometimes, it is not the time. And as the churches discern the time to resume live, public worship, amid the constraints of gradual release from lockdown, Ken Howcroft suggests that this is, above all else, the time to talk of God – but preceded by Tom Stuckey's timely reminder that the God of whom we might talk remains an unfathomable mystery to us all.

John Bell, July 2020. Photo from the official West Indies 1950 tour programme which I have kept since that day in 1950.

**There is a time for everything and a season for every activity under heaven**

(Ecclesiastes 3: 1)

This is a new time for all of us, whatever our age, experience or ethnicity. The familiarity of Spring is all around us as new life blossoms in our gardens, hedges, fields and woods. However, the world feels strange as the secure routines of our lives have been laid aside.

**“a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance”** (verse 4)

We seek God’s help to deal with the helter-skelter of our emotions as we pass through this time and give thanks for special moments like a phone conversation which lightens our mood, perhaps one we may not have had normally. Let us be aware each day of brightening someone else’s life in whatever small way is within our means to do. We also hold in mind and prayer those who no longer feel like laughing or dancing, those for whom light has been extinguished, like a candle in the dark. We pause and remember those for whom the world has become a dark place.

**“a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them”** (verse 5a)

Stones feel harsh and unyielding. I’d rather think about Jesus’s teaching on the Kingdom of heaven in which he talked about the mustard seed, a tiny little thing which grew and grew until it was so huge “the birds of the air could nest in its branches” (Luke 13: 18-19).



It doesn’t seem like the time for gathering right now. It’s not even harvest so we can’t think about gathering in the corn. As it is Spring the image of scattering the mustard seed is perhaps enough. However, if we think hard enough there may be some gathering to be done. We can “gather our thoughts” and add them to our prayers, knowing God is always listening even when we forget He is. We have lots of opportunities to think, through the conversations we have, the things we read, music we listen to and the short walks we do. Our slower pace of life is an opportunity to ponder on ourselves, on others and on God. What sort of world do we want at the end of this? What sort of world would better reflect God’s loving relationship with us? What needs to change?

**“a time to embrace and a time to refrain”** (verse 5b)

We thank God if we have someone in our household we can still embrace and pray for those who can’t physically embrace anyone at this time. Let’s remember there are other ways to embrace, by listening on the phone or helping out in safe ways. Our world may have shrunk but God’s love hasn’t and He still provides ways for us to experience and share it.

**“a time to search and a time to give up”** (verse 6a)

We continue to seek God’s way in the quiet but sometimes we feel like giving up because we are despondent, afraid or demotivated. These days echo the words in our Covenant service, “Let me be full. Let me be empty.” Feeling empty isn’t a failure though. It’s a pause, a step on the way, a stillness through which God waits for us whilst surrounding us with His love. Nature gives us examples, like the swan which sits so still and patiently on its nest, waiting for weeks and weeks for its young to hatch. We can learn from the swan.

**“a time to keep and a time to throw away, a time to tear and a time to mend”** (verses 6b and 7a)

Well, there’s a lot of this sort of thing going on just now as we busy ourselves with all manner of sorting, tidying and mending those things we never normally get round to - drawers, cupboards, garages, lofts, emails, photos etc. etc. There are lovely moments to be had as we rediscover long forgotten things. Let’s remember to have a productive throwing away as we strive to recycle what we no longer have a use for. We also need to be thankful for those possessions we do appreciate as we read about, and see, the poverty and deprivation all around us. Unjust social and political systems are what need to be torn down. Perhaps the restrictions on buying non-essential items can free us to reflect whether we need as much as we used to think we did. Let us, with God’s guidance, be more aware of the damage our greed does to the environment.

God can give us peace to reflect on the past, imagination to have ideas for the future but, especially, to live in the moment. We can listen to the wind in the trees, to birdsong which fills our gardens and streets, see the changing sunlight on water, smell flowers and herbs, taste what we eat and touch each other in ways which

bring comfort and hope because..... **“He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the hearts of people..... I know that everything God does will endure for ever; nothing can be added to it and nothing taken from it.”** (verses 11 and 14a)

*Margaret Lee, Swanwick, Derbyshire, compiled during the lockdown. Photo by Joan Bell, June 2020, Cuddington.*

## Trinitarian Mystery

I remember hearing a preacher describe the Trinity in the following way. He said, ‘I am father to my children, son to my parents and husband to my wife’. I suspect that this role depiction is how many of us view the Trinity.

While we in the Western Church hold to the ‘oneness’ of God acting in three different ways, Christians in the Eastern Church emphasize the distinctiveness of the three. They picture the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as three persons constantly interacting with each other in love; sharing together as they exchange pain and energy. Theologians use the word *perichoresis* to describe this movement; a sort of barn dance of spiralling activity. This presents the Trinity as community. Another way of thinking is to picture God as a vast loving cosmic sea ebbing and flowing, ever changing, yet always staying the same.

There is a story told about St. Augustine, the great 4<sup>th</sup> century bishop of Carthage. He was strolling by the seashore puzzling over the Trinity. He had written fifteen books about it and was no closer to understanding. He saw a little boy running backwards and forwards across the beach filling his earthenware pot with sea water and pouring it into a hole which he had dug in the sand. Augustine watched fascinated by this repetitive activity. He finally went to the lad and asked, ‘what are you doing?’ ‘I am trying to get that’, said the lad pointing to the sea, ‘into that’, pointing to the hole. Augustine at last understood why he was having trouble describing the Trinity.

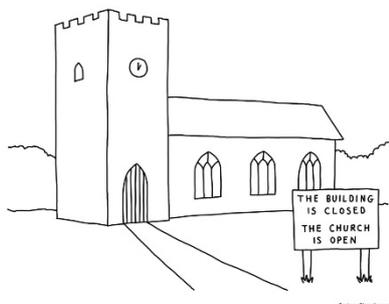
God is beyond us, yet ever with us; an eternal mystery of love to be worshipped adored and experienced.

*Revd Tom Stuckey, May 2020, President of the Methodist Conference 2005-06, now retired to Christchurch, Dorset.*

## Breaking the Mirrors

“Break every mirror in the house!” said Pope Francis, writing to the Pontifical Mission Societies. In other words, if our old people are to dream dreams and our young people are to see visions in this season after Pentecost, we ought not to be looking obsessively at ourselves and the church, but to God and to what God is doing both amongst us and in the world beyond us.

Discernment of the ‘What is the work of God?’ is still listed formally as a primary task on the Church’s agenda, but these days you rarely hear the question directly addressed. Perhaps that is because when it was formally asked, the answer was often given solely in terms of what we are doing, as if by definition that were always co-terminous with God’s work and will. We have always found it harder to ask whether our church activities are not just what God needs us to be doing, but what God needs us to be doing most (to develop a criterion promoted by Wesley).



What does God most need us to be doing after the immediate crisis of the coronavirus is over? Take, for example, the use of our buildings for prayer and worship. Are they places for non-essential leisure activities, as the Government has seemed to think? Or are they more essential for our personal and corporate health?

There are those who want churches to be open for some limited purposes even during a dangerous pandemic. Many Catholics in particular like to slip into a church without necessarily having to attend a formal ‘service’ or event. But so do others, including those who do not normally ‘go to church’ (although they might be among the increasing numbers who have

logged in anonymously to the services ‘streamed’ online since the pandemic began). They like to slip into a church to sit quietly by themselves, mull things over, find some peace and possibly say a prayer. Yes, you can do that anywhere, but sometimes it is hard to become aware of the presence of God just anywhere. On those occasions you need to go into a place hallowed by others as somewhere where they have found God or discovered that God has found them. “You are here to kneel”, as TS Eliot put it, “where prayer has been valid”.

Sometimes contemplating architecture, artwork, crosses, candles, Bibles, elements of the sacrament and other physical embodiments can be a real help. We look at them until, if it pleases God, we pass through them and discover God looking at us.

If these things are to happen in times when there is danger of infection, trained stewards would have to limit the numbers attending, ensuring that those who come in sanitise themselves on entry and exit and keep two metres away from each other, and sanitising where they have sat and anything they have touched before the next person takes their place.

Would we have the will to organise that in Methodist churches? Even in our larger churches it is sometimes hard enough to find people to act as door stewards, car park attendants and coffee makers for the main acts of worship. Moreover, our apparent motivation for 'going to church' is often mainly to do with seeing and being with others. 'Fellowship' and 'Friendship' have been key words for us over the years. Our informal coat of arms is a mug flanked by a tea pot and coffee pot rampant. Before a service, after a service and increasingly during a service our noise can be deafening. We can appear to prefer talking to listening, even where God is concerned. We know in our hearts that, as Wesley put it, still and silent is the sound, the whispers of God's grace; but we would prefer to make a joyful noise to the Lord. We pray by singing – which is hard when singing in close proximity to others is a good way of transmitting the current virus.

I am not saying that these things are wrong. They are part of me. They have helped make me what I am. I appreciate them enough to poke fun at them, knowing that in doing so I am poking fun at myself. But when not in lockdown I also like to slip quietly into the cathedral near where I live. The other tradition is part of me as well – and maybe God is calling us to emphasise it slightly more and in new ways as we seek to engage with people around us in the world of the 'new normal'.

There are signs that the lockdown has produced a raised sense of the importance of 'family' or 'household' religion and ritual. Despite Susanna Wesley's example with John and Charles Wesley and her other children, in recent times this has gone out of fashion. Perhaps we need to think of how we provide resources (web-based and other) to support and encourage people in developing new forms of it, not just as a way of enticing them to 'come to church' but for its own sake and for their own good.

Similarly, we need to develop imaginative ways of engaging with those who were not previously willing to come to church but have been willing to log in online. Many seem to be seeking for meaning or exploring the deeper things in life. Wesley's original class and band meetings involved people exploring together what was happening to them, and what, if anything, God might have to do with it all. We have not been good at encouraging that sort of thing. It is almost as if we know we are in the depths but are too embarrassed or have forgotten how to cry to the Lord from them. If that is the case, admitting it to ourselves, to others and to God would be a good start.

Above all, it is time to talk of God, in order to hear what God is saying to us and through us.

*Revd Ken Howcroft, June 2020, President of the Methodist Conference 2014-15, now retired to Lichfield. With thanks to the Revd Sue Levitt for providing the cartoon. Photo by John Bell in Tromso Parish Church, also known as the Arctic Cathedral, Norway. It isn't near where Ken lives.*

#### 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](mailto:johnabell@supanet.com) Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.

