

## Reflections and Prayers – Saints in Communion

This is the 20<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.

### Reflections



It's hard to believe that this is the 20<sup>th</sup> edition of Reflections and Prayers. Like the reflection in the water, there's something that prompts us, in the very stillness, quiet and calm, to pause, to gaze and ... and to reflect. For reflections only come from stillness: there are none in rough water, and even in the slightest ripples they are distorted and, notwithstanding the pretensions of some modern art, become grotesque and meaningless.

It is worth pondering that reflections also reveal some images which are unseen above the water, as the photo shows. Look very closely.

*Photo by Joan Bell. August 2020. Bridge 213, which carries Lodge Lane over the Trent and Mersey Canal at Dutton, Cheshire.*

This week's reflections, from the contrasting perspectives of Susan Howdle and Michael Gough, are bound together by the phrase 'the Communion of Saints', the MHB heading for its section of hymns of Christian fellowship, prayer and covenant, and both follow on from some of my recent pieces. For readers unfamiliar with Norley Methodist Church, the notes below Michael's reflection offer words of explanation.

### Stained Glass Saints

One of the (not very many) pleasures of the past few months has been having the occasion to be in touch with old friends, and it's been a great delight to hear from John and Joan Bell, and to read the great collection of reflections that John has offered over the weeks.

I want to pick up on the one he recently wrote (no. 17), reflecting on so many points of his life story, which particularly spoke to me, as we have so much in common: our roots in the Methodism of the north-east (although I came from 'Prim' stock, not Wesleyan – a great divide!); our manse upbringing; even our holidays at The Adelphi Methodist Guest House in St Leonards-on-Sea where we first met as young people!

John had asked me if I would contribute something, so he may get more than he bargained for, as I would like to offer one or two items over the weeks, sparked off by his reminiscences – I hope you've saved his purple prose so that you know what I'm referring to.

For this first one, I start where he started, as he actually mentions my husband Peter who chaired the Joint Implementation Commission for the Anglican Methodist Covenant, and reflects on the good relationships which his father (like mine) had with Anglican colleagues. But there are some beacons of hope still, one of which is Oakwood Church in Leeds where Peter and I are members, just down the road from Lidgett Park where John's father was the minister.

Oakwood is a joint Methodist-Anglican partnership, and we have become very much a united and growing church, in worship and mission and fellowship, which is a great joy. The building in which we worship (in 'normal' times) is a Methodist building, our Anglican friends having left their very fine, but impossible to maintain, Victorian church building to join us.



What I want to talk about starts at Oakwood Church. Just the day before the lockdown began in March I was inside the church and something made me take one or two photos, which have been nice to have in this period.

I'd like to share one of them with you, a favourite bit of the church for me: this stained-glass window. Yes, it's perhaps a bit old-fashioned looking, but it was moved from the old Roundhay Methodist Church that was next door, when the present church was built about 30 years ago.

I have to admit that sometimes I find myself looking at it when I should be listening to a sermon. Why do I like it? Well, partly because the way it's now installed: it's not high and lifted up, but is down at our floor level, feeling like one of us.

But more because of what it contains. I hope you can see, it's a woman – if not a saint, a saintly woman – and she's got her knitting with her: a box with a ball of wool and knitting needles.

In churches there are often stained-glass pictures of brave saints – St George slaying the dragon, or people suffering lots of arrows being shot into them. But I think I would bet there aren't many windows with knitting in them. A woman getting on with what she did best, sticking to her knitting!

I don't know about you but I'm not much good at knitting. There are people at our church who are, and during the lockdown they've been doing lots of knitting for various good causes. No doubt it's the same in many churches.

But of course in the lockdown there have been so many people doing so many good things, for other people. There have been all the people doing heroic tasks on the front line – you might say slaying the dragon of Covid19. But so many other people too, of all faiths and none, and you've probably been part of that. You know the sort of thing I mean: neighbours looking out for each other, doing shopping, ringing up lonely people.

I always remember a lovely phrase of the then Chief Rabbi, Jonathan Sacks, many years ago: "the eternity of small acts of loving kindness" – how such things can make a difference, a lasting difference, to people and to the community.

Doing, you might say, saintly things. But if I were to call them saints, they'd be keen to say, 'I'm no saint'. Well, it's true that none of us are, or are likely to be, in one sense – we're not going to work the sort of miracles that mean that we get 'canonised' by the church, and become 'official' saints. Well, maybe you will, but I certainly won't.

But I remember St Paul, that first and greatest Christian missionary and the little groups of Christians that he had brought into knowing the good news of God's love made known to us in Jesus Christ. Christians who then drove him up the wall in all sorts of ways, so he had to keep shooting off letters to them to put them straight. Even though he tore a strip off them, he did so in love, and he would address them with a word which is often translated in our English bibles as 'saints' – people who were at least seeking to be better disciples of Jesus. I'd like to try to be that sort of saint.

As we continue to come in and out of lockdown, there are people who still live with so much loss, and grief, and weariness. And it would be a brave person to predict that there aren't more dark days ahead. So we still need all the 'saints' we can get.

I don't know whether you know the story of the little boy who was asked what a saint was and, remembering the stained glass windows he'd seen in church, said "a saint is one of those people the light shines through".

And that's the sort of saint we can all be – whether we're any good at knitting or not.

## **Koinonia – ‘gathering to be sent’**

Whilst we’ve been in ‘lockdown’ we’ve had to come to terms with being isolated and being apart from our friends and family. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are encouraged to live in ‘fellowship’ - sometimes referred to as *koinonia*. Yet, Government guidance in the light of the Covid-19 pandemic is quite clearly stating the opposite and following these rules and guidelines is keeping us apart and stopping us from meeting and worshipping together. Given this situation, this reflection seeks to explore how the Greek word *koinonia* is meant to be understood in the context of Christian discipleship and fellowship.

*Koinonia* is a transliterated form of the Greek word *κοινωνία*, which refers to concepts such as communion or fellowship, joint participation, the share which one has in anything, a gift jointly contributed, a collection, a contribution. Aside from the fellowship of Jesus and his early disciples, the first occurrence of *koinonia* in the New Testament is in Acts 2:42, where Luke writes of the followers of Jesus that “they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” So, we see that from the beginning, Christian fellowship has been, and is, a key aspect of Christian life. Believers in Christ are to come together in love, faith, and encouragement. That is the essence of *koinonia*.

Andrew Herbert (see note below) in his MA research concluded that ‘place’ has a powerful influence on our lives; there’s something more to church gatherings in the familiar surroundings of our own buildings; they promote a sense of belonging - of ‘home’, of ‘sanctuary’ - a safe space. It is an emplacement of a ‘sacred space’ shaped for, and by, its local mission; (e.g. a commitment to hospitality found in the name of our own ‘Open Door’ Room – see note below). A church building is place for action against human isolation and a venue for witness and outreach!

In his book ‘Holy Habits’, Andrew Roberts also says that ‘Whenever we see the discipleship movement of Jesus being renewed, we see a re-discovery of church as missional community with a renewed emphasis on both outward-looking service and inward-focused depth of relationship’ (p.93). We see a *trinity* of vital relationships reinvigorated:

- With God - one's own fellowship with the triune God
- With a world in need of love - one's sense of connectedness with the world - locally, regionally, globally (i.e. here, near and far)
- With fellow disciples - one's sense of being part of the ‘body of Christ’ – both *koinonia* and *ecclesia* (the wider church)

So *koinonia*, or fellowship, is a highly nuanced word, with layers of meaning. I’ve come to think of it in the following way, starting small - with ‘self’.

- Self: one’s own sense of fellowship with God
- Personal: one's fellowship/relationship with someone else
- Family: less so these days as families have largely ‘outsourced’ faith discussions to the church or schools
- Group: small groups sharing understanding and experiences
- Denominational Church and the *ecclesia*
- Festivals and gatherings (e.g. Greenbelt)

It is easy to get these layers of fellowship muddled or just focus on one aspect as one’s own participation ebbs and flows with our ups and downs in discipleship. Considering the first three layers, the starting point is one’s own relationship with God.

Our understanding of God as *Trinity* offers us a glimpse of what fellowship with other human beings should be - supporting, leading and conceding to each other, with an ever-mindful eye to the world's needs. St Paul regards his fellowship with Christ as all sufficient - *I can do all things through him who strengthens me* (Philippians 4:13).

There has been much written about Andrei Rublev's Icon, *The Trinity* (c.1411), but note the table around which the figures are seated has a fourth ‘empty’ place for a further person to join them. This is you!



Our 'interpersonal relationships' can also carry the essence of *koinonia*. The monastics might call this having a 'soul friend'; that's not 'soul mate' (which in secular society is usually taken to mean 'life partner'), but more as in the tradition of spiritual mentor or coach.

The early followers of Jesus met in small groups. We read in Acts 2:42 how disciples gathered, shared, ate, and lived together, and were a living prophetic symbol of the Kingdom of God. Early Methodism had 'Class Meetings' in its DNA. I can make the case that Norley@9 and Café Church (see note below) are current examples of such gatherings. Very often it is through our sharing of our thoughts and experiences that we get a fuller picture and understanding of God. The Persian/Islamic poet Rumi offers the following:

"The truth was a mirror in the hands of God. It fell and broke into pieces. Everybody took a piece of it, and they looked at it and thought they had the truth."

This suggests we will only see and understand God fully through *koinonia* – as the 'Body of Christ'.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic affected your discipleship; personally, as a member of a discipleship group, or the wider church group to which we belong? There's a balance to be struck in the *trinity* of caring for ourselves, each other, and people in our community but, as Richard Rohr reminds us in his book 'Falling Upwards', the most frequently occurring 'commandment' in the Bible is "don't be afraid". He counts 365 occurrences of this instruction in the Bible: one for each day of the year!

I'm choosing to understand *koinonia* as 'gathering (no matter how) to be sent'. By nurturing of our own personal 'holy habits', perhaps sharing with someone else or even within one's family, and reflecting on the intentionality of gathering in witness, we might come together (as soon as we can) for a renewed church with a reinvigorated mission to love God, our neighbour and ourselves, better serving a world in pain - here, near and far. In the meantime, let's continue to develop our *koinonia* using all the modern tech tools we can and be ready to re-open our buildings in the knowledge that:

"... where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:22)

*Michael Gough, August 2020. Michael is a member of Norley Methodist Church, Cheshire.*

*Andrew Herbert lives in Chester and has researched the importance of place in Christian discipleship.*

*Norley@9 is an informal, participative act of worship, and Café Church a midweek discussion forum on topical and theological issues. The 'Open Door' room is a hospitable space in the church building, based on words in Revelation 3:8; 'Look, I have set before you an open door which no one can shut'.*

#### 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.

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