

Reflections and Prayers: What will it be like?

This is the 23rd 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 is? What might have been? And what will be?

Many Methodists who read this may not have realised that it is the beginning of a new Methodist year: it always starts on September 1st, conveniently timed to coincide with the school/academic year. Albeit in the most abnormal circumstances and perhaps not without difficulty, some ministers and their families will have moved to a new manse and circuit and their children to new schools, and some will have retired and moved to a new home, and 'sat down' as we quaintly say. At the moment, we all probably feel a bit disconnected: *that's what is*.

Joan and I were supposed to board the P&O cruise ship Arcadia for a four-week holiday to Canada and the eastern seaboard of the USA on September 6th: the ship (as I write) is anchored off Southwold on the coast of Suffolk, England, seemingly going nowhere in particular. We would have visited Newfoundland, Nova Scotia, New York, to name but a few ports of call, but alas not: *that's what might have been*.

Instead we might visit the inner reaches of the eastern Atlantic seaboard – New Brighton, perhaps?

On June 30th 2004, at the Methodist Conference held at Loughborough (at which I happened to be a lay representative from the Chester and Stoke-on-Trent District), I was designated as the Vice-President of the Conference for 2005-06. The usual custom of tipping off those designated as President and VP the night before had been overlooked, so neither Tom Stuckey nor I had any idea it was us until the public announcement was made to the Conference on the Wednesday morning. Chris Kitchin, then responsible for Church Media and Communications, surreptitiously crept up behind my seat in the Conference Hall and whispered, 'John, come with me, your life will never be the same again'.



This phrase has echoed in my head many times since March this year. Big, bold statements are always dangerous, open to challenge and hard to justify or prove, but surely nothing like the present pandemic crisis has ever assailed the whole world at the same time in modern times. Even in World Wars, children kept going to school and adults to work – and there was plenty of it; people could comfort and embrace each other in their distress; churches sustained weekly worship and Holy Communion; natural human relationships were not distanced. Not so now: it is different, unreal and we wonder what the future holds: *that's what will be*.

Altogether now – and – 'Que sera, sera; whatever will be, will be!'

John Bell, September 2020. Photo by Joan Bell of Arcadia at Goa, India in happier days for cruise lines, March 2018. And the song, composed in 1956, was first sung by Doris Day.

But let's be more serious. Eight weeks ago, in edition 15, Margaret Lee and Ken Howcroft offered their reflections on the theme 'Time to talk of God'. This week's come from them too – as ever quite independently – but from their contrasting perspectives they unwrap and explore (in Margaret's personal reflection) how God calls us to respond to a post-pandemic world which will be different from that we left a few months ago, and (as Ken puts it) what will it [the world] be like when everything is as God wants it to be?

The better part?

The familiar old hymn “God moves in a mysterious way” (StF 104, R&S 59) certainly reflects the progress of my thoughts as I’ve worked on this meditation over the past weeks. I started with the story of Mary and Martha in Luke chapter ten, prompted by the easing of some lockdown restrictions. This presented many of us with choices again and perhaps a challenge. At the beginning of lockdown I assumed, and I don’t think I was alone, that the eventual ending would simply mean picking up where we had left off earlier. I don’t think that now.

I used to think of Martha and Mary as opposites, and for most of my life I have identified with Martha’s busyness and felt somewhat indignant on her behalf, even thinking just like her when I was overloaded. Then came retirement a couple of years ago and a bit of a rest, but in my head I was assuming more Martha opportunities might appear for the future. Strange things then happened during lockdown in that I found myself with the opportunity to explore the Mary part of me, somewhat dusty and neglected after years of social work and district safeguarding but present in my early life, I think. A year ago, I would never have imagined I would be helping people by writing these meditations for circulation. Recently I started to think where next, back to my familiar Martha role or more of Mary? I got rather stuck with that and so paused a little while.

Shortly afterwards I was walking on the Ridgeway in Oxfordshire on a Saturday afternoon whilst meeting part of our family for the first time since lockdown. The Ridgeway is a long distance, ancient and chalky trackway across southern England, the original M4! We only did a tiny bit, having walked up from below on a rather warm day. It has magnificent views from its high vantage point looking over downland countryside to the flat plain beyond. It is not an area I know well so I was wondering what I was looking at as I walked, perhaps the spires of Oxford if there hadn’t been a heat haze. Then the word “curiosity” sprang into my head as if from nowhere. I have always liked that word. It is different to “nosiness”. It is a wider, less intrusive idea, not wanting to find things out for our own ends but more of a reflective mind - when, where, how, what? It has served me well over the years. “I wonder if.....” was one of my favourite ways of testing things out in therapy sessions especially with children who usually have very enquiring minds.

I think God means us to be curious about Him and our shared world. It lets us off the hook from thinking we need all the answers but it does mean asking the questions. God wants us to be curious about His plan for us individually and our church families as we emerge from lockdown into a somewhat changed world and a more unjust one in many ways. This fits with all the various discussions we are having about how we can experience “church” differently in the future.

Jesus was curious about people, like the Samaritan woman he met at the well. Others were also very curious about him and asked lots of questions, like the rich young ruler and Pilate who was clearly puzzled. Zacchaeus even climbed a tree to satisfy his curiosity.

Then I came full circle back to Mary and Martha. I think Mary was very curious and that is why she sat at Jesus’ feet for so long and why Jesus said of her “Mary has chosen what is better and it will not be taken away from her” (Luke 10: 42). By no means was Jesus rejecting Martha’s efforts. I think he was perhaps saying we can be busy, and need to be some of the time, but we must also be curious about ourselves, about others and about God. Therefore, I have come to think that Mary and Martha are not opposites but they are fluid parts of the whole. Individually we can move between being a Martha or a Mary at different stages of our lives as can church families too, using the wealth of gifts God has given us.

Having said all this, I am still not much closer to working out how like Martha or how like Mary I will be in the future! What I am sure about is that if I continue to be curious God will lead me forward.

Then one day, as St Paul reminds us, we will be curious no more: “For we know in part and we prophesy in part, but when perfection comes, the imperfect disappears.....Now we see but a poor reflection; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.” (1 Corinthians 13: 9,10,12)

Margaret Lee, Swanwick, Derbyshire: August 2020.

Ignoring the Kingdom?

What do you think it will be like when everything is as God wants it to be, when it’s obvious everywhere that God’s in charge? That’s what I hear Jesus saying to you and me now, in the language of today. [If you want to see

how the Gospel writers remembered him saying it in terms of the world of the first century, look at Mark 4:30 and Luke 13:18 and 20: they talk of the 'kingdom of God', whereas Matthew talks generally of the 'kingdom of heaven']. You have my permission to stop reading now and just think about how you would answer him – and, if you can, to share your thoughts with others.



But how will you think about it or picture it? It's hard, isn't it? In one of Iris Murdoch's novels, *"The Book and the Brotherhood"*, one of the characters says that when Captain Cook's ship arrived in New Zealand and anchored in the bay, the native Maoris just got on with their fishing and the rest of their lives, because they could not conceptualise what it might be. It was as if they could not see it. Effectively, they ignored it.

Is that how we treat the "kingdom"? It's so hard to imagine God and a godly world. We can only think about or understand new things by reference back to what we already know (e.g. "It's like this in this respect, but it's not like it in that respect"). The danger then is that we imagine God in our image, and a godly world (the "kingdom") in terms of our world. God, being God, is of course both engaged with this world, and knowable in terms of it. That is what the truth of the incarnation points to; it is what the "Word becoming flesh" is all about. But God, being God, is also "other", transcending our understanding and our reality. If we concentrate on that and forget about incarnation, however, we are in danger of getting on with our lives as if God and God's "kingdom" did not exist, treating them like Captain Cook's ship moored in the bay.

Somehow incarnation and transcendence have to hang together. So how are we to imagine, think about and describe God and God's ways? Above all, Jesus did it through parables. They embedded talk of God in things and happenings of an everyday world (made vivid for his first hearers by being the particular world of the first century). In them, for example, people sweep rooms; farmers sow seed or look for lost sheep; people get mugged and left for dead in the street, and are ignored as if their lives don't matter; and family relationships get broken by prodigality and remade by generosity, repentance and forgiveness. God is in the ordinary. Yet God is also extraordinary and "other". God's ways, new life and resurrection turn upside down the lives that we try to make so comfortable and our understanding of God that is often so homely. We ignore or explain away the topsy-turvy things in Jesus's parables at our peril.

A 20th century example of what the parables are doing is the science fiction story *Meteor* by John Wyndham. There are two threads in it. In one, an alien army sets off in a spacecraft looking for a new planet to conquer and colonise. In the other, people are investigating a ball-sized meteor that has landed on earth. They drill into it and find it is hollow. Ant-like creatures swarm out and start stinging them. They kill them with insecticide. They do not recognise the "meteor" as a spacecraft with aliens in because they cannot imagine them being so small.

So too Jesus's parables shock us and jolt us out of our complacency into imagining new possibilities. For example, God and God's ways come like a thief in the night; are somehow illustrated by the equivalent of a metal detectorist finding treasure in a field and then ensuring that the benefit is all theirs by spending all they have to buy the field without telling the owner of what they have found in it; require letting evil alone until it is the right time to deal with it, because acting too soon will do too much damage to the good that is developing alongside it; and are exemplified by it being the person of another faith who acts in what the Bible describes as a godly way in stopping to help someone who is in great need, whilst those who belong to God's "people of the Book" walk past and avoid them.

Parables, like poetry, are important ways of imagining and describing truth. That is why we sing the faith as well as preach it or write learned articles about it. RS Thomas wrote a beautiful poem about *The Kingdom* which is both comforting and disturbing. I often find myself thinking of a picture of the Annunciation and of Mary's Magnificat when I read it.

The Kingdom

*It's a long way off but inside it
There are quite different things going on:*

*Festivals at which the poor man
Is king and the consumptive is*

*Healed; mirrors in which the blind look
At themselves and love looks at them
Back; and industry is for mending
The bent bones and the minds fractured
By life. It's a long way off, but to get
There takes no time and admission*

*Is free, if you purge yourself
Of desire, and present yourself with
Your need only and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

So, what will it be like when everything is as God wants it to be? How do you see it?

Revd Ken Howcroft, former President of the Methodist Conference, July 2020. Photo, from publicity material, of Whitby in North Yorkshire where James Cook began his astonishing seafaring career on ships carrying coal from the Tyne to London.

Prayers at this time of the year

We offer prayers at this time for the people of the Methodist Church:

- For its senior leadership, at the start of a new Methodist year, but also at this very challenging time;
- For all those expecting to attend the councils of the Church – the Methodist Council, Connexional Committees, District Synods, Circuit Meetings, Church Councils – who may yet again not meet face to face;
- For ministers, both deacons and presbyters, and their families who have moved from one circuit to another, but unable to be welcomed or begin their ministry in the usual way;
- For newly stationed probationer ministers struggling to find their feet at the outset of their ministry;
- For circuits and congregations unable to relate to their new ministers as they would have wished;
- For ministers who have retired, usually to another place, and unable to make the new connections they might have envisaged;
- For ministers and circuits in the midst of a re-invitation process;

We pray with and for them all.



The photo is 18, Roker Park Road, Sunderland (which Joan took in November 2018): it was a manse in September 1951 where my family moved when I was nine. The house to the left, number 17, was also a manse, and they stand in a terrace numbered 14 to 21. As I prepared this reflection, I sought a manse photo and, serendipitously, googled Roker Park Road, only to find a newspaper report of a double suicide, in October 2003, of Dr George and Mrs Barbara Purvis who lived in number 14, the end house of the terrace. We had been neighbours and I remembered them well, with their children Peter and Linda: they lived there for over 50 years until the strain of terminal illness became too great. A specialist anaesthetist, George had the knowledge and means, sadly, to end their lives.

It made me think about the present situation and the overwhelming challenges many people are facing. So, we continue in our prayers.

We offer our prayers with and for those who find this period of pandemic especially challenging, to the point of utter despair; without the normally reliable means of support; confined and constrained, with little escape; under immense pressure; deeply worried about loved ones they can't visit, let alone embrace; even feeling suicidal. Family, friends, neighbours, colleagues – whoever they are, we pray for them.

Loving God, as we commend them to your care and keeping, in your mercy, hear us in the name of Jesus.
Amen.

Note and encouragement to all readers

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.