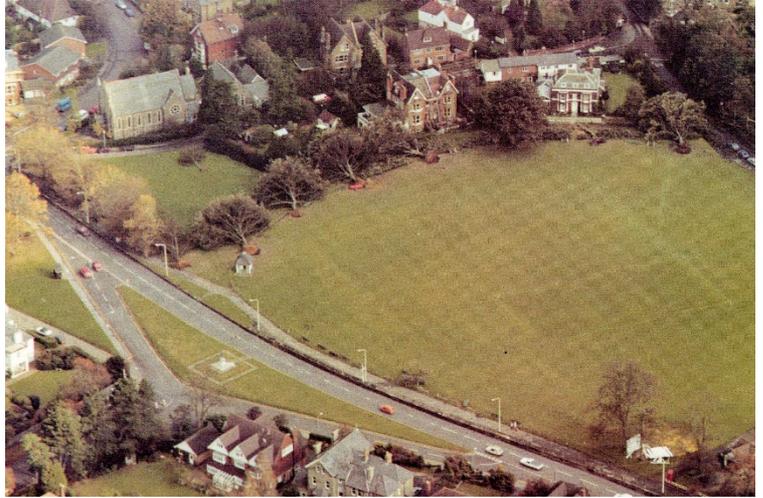


## Reflections and Prayers: the winds are blowing against us, but there is hope

This is the 25<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.

### The winds are blowing against us

One day in July, forty-five former Presidents and Vice-Presidents of the Methodist Conference met with the newly-inducted incumbents, Richard Teal and Carolyn Lawrence, in a Zoom meeting to 'see' each other, as we might have done at the opening of the Conference (had it happened live), and to share matters of common interest. Ann Leck, VP in 2001-02, leading our opening devotions, used the phrase, 'the winds are blowing against us'. Indeed they were and they continue to blow, but even more so.



Nationally, we observe the shortcomings and shenanigans of the UK government with

increasing disbelief, growing cynicism, even bordering on anger, but unable to do anything about it:

- Its shaky oversight of the nation's response to the coronavirus pandemic, not least the failure to implement a robust and effective test and trace system, whilst at the same time bizarrely diverting our attention by promising a daily test for all, billed 'Moonshot' – what do they take us for?
- Its monumental muddle and many U-turns over the school exams (GCSEs and A levels) in the summer, having known in March that something would need to be arranged – what is the purpose of a Secretary of State for Education?
- Its breath-taking confirmation to proceed with HS2, always based on questionable benefits and already far exceeding budgets, at a time when radically changed working patterns will surely demand less rail travel – who needs to get to London half an hour quicker?
- Its flagrant disregard for international law to amend Brexit legislation of its own making only months before, leading to condemnation by former Prime Ministers of both colours as well as former Cabinet members, the resignations of the most senior law officers of the land and imperilling our nation's moral standing in the world – where will it end?

In communities, we have the prospect of Covid marshals checking up on our errant behaviour and neighbours encouraged to snoop and snitch on us if we break the rules (aka laws) in our own back gardens. The first smacks of the unpleasant methods employed by the Chinese government in which *chengguan*, poorly paid and widely disliked city officers, enforce what we might regard as petty regulations in urban areas as part of the wider policy of crushing dissent. The second seems calculated to foster ill-will amongst friends and undermine community spirit which may long outlast the immediate crisis. Hands up if (1) you have started peeping through the fence or over the wall, (2) you counted the number of people in next door's garden and (3) if greater than six, including little children (in England), you phoned Mr/s Plod. Have we given up on trust, common sense and civic responsibility?

It may be that it is as individuals we feel the greatest strength of the wind blowing against us, as the next reflection so eloquently sets out. I am most grateful to the Revd Helen Cameron for sharing it with us: the poignancy of her own present experience says it all.

*John Bell, September 2020 – a personal reflection: please feel free to disagree! Photo (The Times) of the six fallen oaks on the edge of the Vine Cricket Ground, Sevenoaks, following the Great Storm of October 15<sup>th</sup> 1987: one remained standing. Contrary to the news stories at the time, the oaks did not give the town its name: it was the other way around – they were planted in 1902 long after the place was named. We lived in Sevenoaks at the time and the winds certainly blew against us that night.*

**'Always be ready to give an account for the hope that is in you'.**

These words (1 Peter 3: 15) have echoed around in my head and my heart during the time of the pandemic.

We are, as God's beloved children, the followers of Jesus of Nazareth, called to give an account for the hope that is in us. This should be a hope not just that we might survive the pandemic unscathed but that in the darkest of days the light of Christ might shine brightly in us and through us. My grandmother, on occasion with real Yorkshire grit, would say in a withering tone to someone or other – "th' meks a better door than a winder". Meaning, I think, she thought they were blocking the light, reducing clarity, obscuring what should be obvious, creating shadows... David Frost, interviewing Archbishop Desmond Tutu during apartheid, said to him – "Archbishop, you strike me as an optimist. How do I stay optimistic with all that I know about the world and human nature?" Tutu replied with passion, "I am not an optimist. That is far too weak a word for a Christian. I see the same world you do. I know the same human weaknesses. I am not an optimist, rather, I am a prisoner of hope. My faith gives me hope".

We can and must give an account of the hope that is in us even when so much is uncertain because we believe God is author of all, the giver of life itself, and we believe that he holds us all in a loving embrace. We believe that nothing is lost and nothing can separate us from the love of God seen in Jesus Christ our Lord. We are people of hope. We have a hope that is based not on how the world looks on any one day, nor on our assessment of the progress of humanity, but rather a hope based on the word made flesh and come among us. We believe that God is with us, bearing our burdens and our wounds. God is with us healing us, redeeming us and ultimately restoring us. We believe that on the cross God in Christ died and in raising Jesus from death God remakes us, makes a place for us in the eternal life of God, and at the last brings us safe home.

It is the resurrection of Jesus from death, which allows us, as a Church, to be more than the local branch of the Jesus of Nazareth Historical Society. Believing in the resurrection and the new creation ushered in by the resurrection of Jesus from the dead gives us hope. The new age, the final phase of God's activity in the world through us and in us, the Church, means that those of us who relate to Jesus, do so, not as a memory of someone who lived a long time ago but as a contemporary. Jesus is not just an idea, not just in our heads and our thoughts, rather he is present now, here and now, and we are drawn now to stand with Jesus in his present life, a life he now lives to God. God is with us, in all we do, in this moment, in this new beginning, in all we do in response to his presence with us through the Holy Spirit, "allowing God to happen in us" as Rowan Williams would say.

Our experience of the pandemic continues. Back in the spring, when the sun shone and we all slowed down and stopped dashing about and there was less air pollution and gardens were tidier, we thought that some good was coming of this pandemic. But –

- when we realised that the deaths of elderly relatives in care homes weren't included in the daily count of lives lost, as though they didn't matter...
- when we realised that those dying of Covid 19 were more often of black or Asian heritage...
- when we realised that painted rainbows on windows and a clap on a Thursday evening didn't help NHS workers pay for their children's school uniforms because their wages were so low...
- when we experienced that moment when those we loved died, without us seeing them, or touching them, and we couldn't mourn them as we wished. My father died last week and I am one of 5 siblings. Only two of us could sit with him in hospital – and I was not one of them.
- when we realised that the two nurses who cared for our Prime Minister when he had Covid 19 and was so ill and who he wanted to thank were immigrants to the UK,

then we knew the real cost of the pandemic is not about whether we can go to Spain on holiday without having to quarantine on return, or hold a BBQ with friends, but rather the pandemic was holding up a light onto our lives, our decision making processes, onto the powerful and how they treated the less powerful and the real question is about who we are, and who we want to be, and whose life matters, and who never needs to ask that question because they can always be certain that their life will always matter because of the privilege of their whiteness, or their wealth, or their power.

So in this time of pandemic we have known separation and we found some of the ways which connect us – Zoom worship and Synod-by-zoom, coffee mornings, bible study, theological book clubs, the old fashioned telephone, a service sheet pushed through our door. I invite you to look at Eularia Clark's painting 'The Storm over the Lake' in the Methodist Modern Art collection. The storm is a frightening one. The waves are huge, people are at risk of drowning and the fear on people's faces is vivid. Jesus, who was asleep, wakes, and in this painting is immersed in the water. His feet are wet. He is a source of light and hope and strength to his

companions in the boat and there is no doubt he is with his friends in their time of hardship and he feels the storm as they do.

The point for reflection is this:

- Some people were lonely before a pandemic came along
- Some people's mental health was a perfect storm for them every day
- Some people can't be sure if their life matters as much as others seem to.

We must not fall into a trap of thinking zoom is the answer to everything. We must preach a gospel, and live lives, and be signs of the connectedness between each of us, and between us and God. If one single person is left to die as of no account, or lesser importance, we all drown. So this is why we are here, and this is our calling and our Methodist way of life and I wonder if we need to commit



again to this way of life which emphasis that Christ died for all, that all can be saved and saved to the uttermost. We are called to be signs of God's love and grace in our communities, to be sources of light and strength and hope. We do this connected to one another and bound to God with a tie that cannot be broken. In our relationship with the living God our souls and bodies become signs of who and what God is: signs of faithfulness, grace, generosity, and mercy. In all of that living and loving and being transformed we give an account of the hope that is in us.

*Revd Helen Cameron, September 2020. Helen is Chair of the Northampton District. Picture (1963) from the Methodist Church website.*

## Final thought and prayer

Helen's quote is from 1 Peter 3, but the first words of his letter, after the greeting, set its theme.

'Blessed be the God and father of our Lord Jesus Christ! By his great mercy we have been born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for you.' (1 Peter 1: 3-4)

With that assurance, we can indeed give an account of the hope that is in us, which will overcome the strongest winds which blow against us, not least in these difficult days.

In our prayers at this time, we pause in silence.....

- giving thanks for the lives of those who have died, especially loved ones known and close to us;
  - praying with and for those who mourn, in their loss and sadness;
  - praying for a new awakening of the hope of Jesus Christ which is in us;
- and we pray in his name. Amen.

### 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.