

Reflections and Prayers: a time to take stock

This is the 27th 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.

Half-time, or is it?

In the mid-1960s, I turned out for a football team called Crawley Olympic which played in the lower reaches of the Crawley and District League: nothing less Olympic did you ever witness. We were more of a ragbag, but one season, we did gain promotion. The half-back line (this dates the story – you knew the position of the players by their shirt numbers) was wholly Methodist – Harry Birchall (4), Alan Swearman (5) and me (6): not being left-footed by instinct, I played left-half-back. Got the picture?

Our strategy to beat the opponents usually failed, mainly because we didn't have one. Our tactics were often misguided, so we changed them, but didn't tell the forwards. Sometimes there were casualties, owing to general lack of fitness, some being overweight and all being male. But come half-time, we'd suck our orange segments, tend our wounds and gather round our captain (whose name escapes me, so let him be Boris) for the pep talk. We'd learnt about what we were up against and there was still everything to play for: if they're 5-0 up, why can't we score 5 in the second half? Good rallying stuff and encouraging, but thin on ideas and substance. At least we knew when it would end.

In our nation, is this half-time for the coronavirus? As we watched the captain's latest TV briefing, flanked by the team's most eminent technical coaches, we perhaps had a sense of *déjà vu*. Here we go again; more restrictions for a while; but at least we understand more about the opponent. We begin the second half; then there could be extra time, maybe replays, until we achieve the promised victory. 'Together, we will defeat this', and the captain implores us to devote our collective effort to Team UK – well England, at any rate: as in footy, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have their own teams and sometimes they play better than we do.

In the 15th edition of this series, Margaret Lee reflected on the passage from Ecclesiastes about a time for everything. Whether it's half-time or not, and six months since the pandemic crept upon us, as the situation deteriorates, it is surely time to take stock. We are in for a long haul. The earlier optimism, reminiscent of expectations in the Autumn of 1914, that 'it will be all over by Christmas', if well-intentioned, was misplaced.

However, let it not all be gloom and doom: here are a few reflections on ways forward.

Keep calm and carry on

So read the first of those simple posters which have become so popular, with their encouraging slogans. Several reflections in previous weeks have spoken of the apparent normality of nature around us. There may be so many things which we are not permitted to do – not least, meeting families and friends and interacting with them naturally and lovingly – but there is much we can still do.



During our time in Sevenoaks, I preached at the Weald Methodist Church many times. Weald is a small village below the greensand ridge south of the town: its Methodist Church (pictured, but now closed) lies on the edge of the village green. One evening, I quoted the lines of WH Davies' poem, 'Leisure'; at the end of the service, Miss Wyn Ellis, then in her 90s, who played the harmonium (and had been the village schoolmistress for decades) took me by the arm and said, 'Now Mr Bell, come with me and I'll show you where he wrote that poem' and she led me a few yards down the lane to a farm gate where we viewed the idyllic Wealden landscape and she disclosed that she had known WH Davies. Wow!

**‘What is this life if, full of care,
we have no time to stand and stare.
No time to stand beneath the boughs
and stare as long as sheep or cows.’**

Indeed. Assailed by the confusion of uncertain strategies, tactical U-turns and mixed messages from the government, coupled with the frustrations of having our activities curtailed, maybe Davies’ poetic words offer encouragement to seek out those things which are not affected, seem normal and that we can continue to enjoy. They can be a source of comfort and assurance.

Or, as Psalm 46: 10 puts it,

‘Be still and know that I am God.’

Last week’s expectation that we would resume live services at Norley was fulfilled and despite the sparsely positioned chairs, many of us were able to share together in common worship again: as some readers in other places have experienced, it was so good to be back. It was as an oasis in the desert; we saw each other ‘live’ for the first time in six months; maybe not wholly normal (ah, the ban on singing! Just foot-tapping, quiet humming and clapping when it seemed appropriate) but a huge step forward. We shall treasure it every two weeks and see how ‘the second half’ plays out.

Photo of Weald Methodist Church from Sevenoaks District Council archive material. Photo by Joan Bell, May 2020, from our back garden: the owner of the field rents it out for pasture to a local farmer.

I am going out fishing.....

So Peter announces (John 21: 3); ‘we will go with you’, said the others. This verse in the New English Bible translation always reminds me of the snappy narratives of ‘The Magic Roundabout’ – that delightful children’s TV programme of the 1960s: you can almost hear Dougal, Zebedee and Brian. ‘Come on lads, let’s find something to do. We can’t cope with all this hanging about.’ (i.e. wondering when Jesus will next appear – soon, as it happens – and then what?)



As evidenced by earlier Reflections, Joan and I have rediscovered the pleasures and benefits of walking, mainly along the paths and lanes within a few miles of Cuddington, some of which we didn’t know existed. Maybe you have had a similar experience. Former sand quarries in this part of mid-Cheshire have become deep water lakes, as we have discovered, some the property of the Warrington and Lymm Anglers Associations. We have encountered their members, with their extensive, murky brown kit and equipment and chatted to them. They bring little tents and stay overnight. They ‘angle’ for pleasure, not consumption, and return their catch, often carp, to the lakes for next time. They know and recognise many of the fish and have named them.

They sit by the lakesides, silently, unmoving, waiting for the fish to rise to the bait. It's a serious business, or pastime. But for the pandemic, we would never have known of or met these people or their passion for angling.

But what is more striking is that, for them, nothing has changed – perhaps until they get home. The gentle skills and arts of angling are unchanged by the pandemic, and perhaps they find solace in it as an escape from daily constraints. They are also in for the long haul, by choice: they will come and go, week in, week out, year in, year out, and are content. They keep calm and carry on.

Photo by Joan Bell, September 2020, of an angler's overnight tent and protective umbrella. This isn't an old quarry, where the lakes are much larger, but the tents the same size.

Nothing can separate us....

Nothing, in the short term, can separate us from the coronavirus pandemic. Nothing remotely like it has ever happened in living memory, which is why it is so hard to cope with: even war wasn't like this. We have never been denied the freedom to exercise basic human instincts of touching, loving, hugging, kissing. However tragic are the 42,000 deaths, the infringement of our intimate, personal freedoms takes a heavy toll. Let's not beat about the bush – it is awful.

But we find ways of coping and ways forward. Perhaps in quiet, peaceful reflection over a farm gate; perhaps in a gradual, stuttering return to worship in our local church; perhaps in the hidden solitude of innocently angling in the local lake; perhaps in other ways we find helpful. We will discern, at least for a while, new patterns of daily life which do not rely on those things which are prohibited but on those which are permitted. At some point – we don't know when – release and relief will come and we shall rejoice.

Even Crawley Olympic won some matches and the left-half-back scored a couple of times. And, always remember Paul's words of assurance, '**nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**'.

John Bell, October 2020, taking stock and looking forward.

A Prayer - Slow us down, O Lord

Eternal and loving God, we recall to our minds your great goodness and that you rekindle our hearts with your love. And we ask, sometimes slow us down, good Lord.

Ease the pounding of our hearts by your quieting presence within us.
Steady our hurried pace with a vision of your eternal reach of time.
Give us, amid the confusion and pressure of each day, the serenity of the everlasting hills.
Break the tensions of our nerves and muscles with the soothing flow of singing streams.
Teach us to pause, to look at a flower, to chat with a friend, to stroke a dog or cat, or simply to do nothing.
Help us, as each day opens, to know your eternal presence around us, or the night approaches, to relax our minds and know the mystical restoring power of rest and sleep.

Slow us down, O Lord, but enable us to grow, rooted and grounded in your love as wonderfully manifest in Jesus Christ. In your mercy, save us from all the temptations and perils that beset us, and in the power of your Holy Spirit, bring us to everlasting life.

In the name of Jesus. Amen

Prayer adapted from an interdenominational church service aboard a P&O cruise ship, 2010.

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 belljohna@btinternet.com Each edition will be released on a Friday so that it can be distributed for Sunday and the following week.