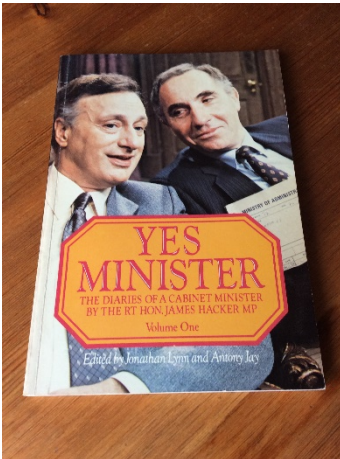


Reflections and Prayers: Knowledge in these uncertain times

This is the 30th 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.

How do you know? What do you know?

A university friend of mine sat a year-end philosophy exam: the first question was ‘How do you know that the desk you are sitting at is there?’ He answered, briefly and helpfully, if a little optimistically, ‘Come and see for yourself, mate.’ He failed the exam, but then he was really studying English.



In an episode of ‘Yes, Minister’, the following dialogue occurs between the Permanent Secretary, Sir Humphrey Appleby (HA), and the Minister for Administrative Affairs, Jim Hacker (JH).

JH: ‘What is it that I don’t know?’

HA: ‘What do you mean?’

JH: ‘I don’t know; it’s just that there’s something I don’t know..... What is it that I don’t know?’

HA: ‘Minister, I don’t know what you don’t know. It could be almost anything’.

Photo by Joan Bell, October 2020, of volume 1 (1981) of the published books. Jim Hacker is on the left, Humphrey Appleby on the right.

That was fictional, albeit we always suspected, with some foundation in the corridors of Whitehall. But US Secretary of Defence, Donald Rumsfeld’s 2002 analysis was real, in the context of Iraqi weapons, when he said that there are *known knowns* (things we know), *known unknowns* (things we know we don’t know) and *unknown unknowns* (things we don’t know we don’t know), adding that the last were the most worrying. In the case of the UK government, what they thought they knew (or wanted to believe) turned out to be wrong, with tragic consequences, not least for Dr David Kelly and his family.

Max Boyce, comedian of yesteryear, regaled TV audiences with the rare (?) triumphs of Wales over England in rugby matches, always ending with, ‘and I know, ‘cos I was there’. Perhaps that’s the only way of knowing.

Knowledge is a wonderful thing: we accumulate lots of it and we also forget it, as those of us who watch TV quiz programmes *know* only too well. It is said that a little knowledge is a dangerous thing: it forms an incomplete picture which can lead to unwise judgements. But also, knowledge can be accompanied by responsibility: if we know something, do we need to act on it? Pretend as we will, we cannot *not know* something that we know. In my working life, especially in senior roles, I would sometimes (wistfully, and slightly tongue in cheek) reply to a colleague who had shared information on a sensitive issue, ‘I wish you hadn’t told me that!’

1st pause for thought: when have you helped someone by acting on what you knew? And have you ever been told something which you could have acted on, but didn’t?

It is usually better to know, even if the knowledge brings dilemma or pain. Indeed, ‘knowledge is power’, a phrase with 7th century Muslim origins; in the business world, the unethical practice of ‘insider trading’, based on some people exploiting their early knowledge as others remained ignorant, enabled huge sums to be made.

Which brings us to uncertainty – not knowing for sure, or not at all. The universal challenge for us, from national governments to individuals, is what to do in the face of uncertainty, i.e. when knowledge is scanty and doubtful. And further, how do we judge that what purports to be accurate knowledge is actually correct? That is about trust and who to believe, when, unlike Max Boyce, you weren’t there.

2nd pause for thought: what decisions do you face today, this week, this month, about any aspect of your life, in the face of uncertainty? What would you like to know, for sure, but don’t or can’t?

Coping with uncertainty

These strange times confront the UK and countries worldwide with unparalleled uncertainty. It has never been like this in our lifetime. Is there something physically evident about wars, which, despite loss of life, render them more easily coped with? Even the polio epidemics of the mid-20th century had more limited impact unless you happened to be a victim. The coronavirus is somehow different: it is invisible, insidious, life-restricting, life-changing, as well as life-threatening. We simply don't know how it will work out, how long it will last and if and when an effective vaccine will be widely available. Our knowledge is minimal, despite being bombarded by daily endless statistics, right now telling us that generally things are getting worse.

Normal activities which we have always taken for granted have been summarily halted or severely restricted, nor do we know when and how they will resume, if at all. Ordinary things like meeting friends and family with their natural human interactions, going to work, shopping, going to the cinema or a football match or on holiday, eating out, going to church, having a haircut, even attending meetings. Some resumed on a limited scale in recent weeks, only to be curtailed again in some places as the virus resurged.

In the government's effort to 'save the NHS', planned medical treatments delayed or postponed have led to further anxiety and suffering; to 'save lives', visits to vulnerable, lonely residents in care homes have been banned or strictly limited; funeral services have been so constrained as to deny the proper celebration of a loved one's life; inevitably, strains on physical and mental health have grown. It is a litany of woe.

Psalm 13 begins 'How long, O Lord?' and repeats the plea three times. Maybe we are asking, even crying out, the same question today: but we don't know the answer yet.

3rd pause for thought: are you keeping a diary of your thoughts and activities in these strange times, perhaps later to look back on, and share with your children, grand-children and great-grand-children?



Photo by Lewis Dimelow of the final preparations to resume worship at Norley Methodist Church, September 2020. There's a photo of the normal church layout in Reflections edition 26.

If the coronavirus pandemic itself dominates our immediate concerns and the daily news headlines, there are other disturbing uncertainties facing Britain and the world. Here are a few:

- Economic legacy of coronavirus – the certainty that some businesses will not survive, patterns of work and employment will change – what will the economic and social landscape look like in 2021 and beyond?
- Brexit – will there be a deal or not? It is astonishing that, so close to the end-of-year deadline, there is still such uncertainty, and the coronavirus can't be blamed for that.
- Scotland – has the positive perception of the Scottish government's oversight, in response to the coronavirus, strengthened the wish for independence and influenced the outcome of a future referendum?
- China and Russia – are there any limits to the apparently malign intentions of their leaders, at home and abroad, not least in their disrespect for human rights?
- USA – who will win the upcoming Presidential election? All we know is that it will be Donald Trump or Joe Biden, leading either to more of the same or perhaps a fresh start for America, not least on the world stage.

4th pause for thought: consider these contrasting scenarios – some close to home, others far distant – yet part of a world order encompassing all nations: then, whatever your political inclinations, pray for wise outcomes and justice for all.

Knowledge of God

'Be still and know that I am God': these words from Psalm 46: 10 have featured in these Reflections a few times recently as a source of assurance in troubling times. Zophar, one of Job's three friends who come to comfort Job in his suffering, says, 'Can you fathom the mystery of God?' (Job 11: 7; in the King James Version, 'canst thou by

searching find out God?') Paul encourages the disciples at Colossae to lead a life worthy of the Lord and 'grow in the knowledge of God' (Colossians 1: 11). Peter, in his second letter, greets his readers with 'Grace and peace be yours in fullest measure, through the knowledge of God and in Jesus our Lord' (2 Peter: 1: 2).

At Easter, we sing Samuel Medley's hymn which begins and ends with the line 'I know that my redeemer lives' (StF 303, R&S 278), an echo of the soprano aria which heralds Part Three of Handel's Messiah, based, not on any New Testament text, but on the words of Job (Job 19: 25).

Now, take a deep breath.....

5th pause for thought: how have you come to know and trust in God and Jesus our Lord?

As I have been compiling these Reflections, announcements have been made that Wales is moving into a lockdown for two weeks, Manchester and South Yorkshire have been designated in English Tier 3, many other areas find themselves in Tier 2 and precautionary preparations are said to be underway for a possible longer national lockdown in November. As we cry out with the Psalmist, 'How long, O Lord, how long?', we seek strength and comfort where we can.

It may come from friends and family, albeit without the intimacy we seek. It may come from being alone with our thoughts at home or in the garden, from a daily or occasional walk, from the precious return to worship in church, from listening to music, from finding something useful to do, from a phone conversation we both value, from think of what you find helpful.

And it may come from the assurance that we are loved by God who will strengthen us and see us through.

You may like to turn again to Psalm 46, Psalm 121 and Romans 8: 35-39, or have your own favourite passage.

6th pause for thought: reflect as you are able on your sources of support at this uncertain time and give thanks. Then, thinking of friends, who might appreciate a call or a card?

Prayer

'How long, O God, how long?'

Loving God, we lay before you the many uncertainties which surround us at this time.

If only we could know what, we could plan.

If only we could know how it will be, we could adjust.

If only we could know when, we could look forward.

If only we could know why.

If only we could know.....

In the meantime, loving God, we continue to put our trust in you, and we know that we will never be separated from your love in Jesus our Lord.

Amen.



Words in this edition, John Bell, October 2020. Photo by Joan Bell, August 2016, Norwick sands and the North Sea, the Shetland Island of Unst. A peaceful place, at least on a fine day, remote and perhaps untouched by the coronavirus.

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.

Any hymns are referenced as far as possible 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.