

Reflections and Prayers: The Long Haul

This is the 40th 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.

Long Hauls

The phrase 'long haul' has many connotations. In my working life I was immensely privileged, especially in the latter years, to fly 'long haul' on business from the UK to Singapore, Hong Kong, Boston, New York, Sydney, Buenos Aires and Sao Paulo, though usually preceded by the ultimate excitement of a short haul flight, the shuttle from Manchester to Heathrow. In retirement Joan and I repeated some of the journeys, not least the very long haul of thirteen hours on the plane to Singapore, then reboarding after a short break for the next eight hours to Sydney, arriving early morning two days later (and ready for a day's sightseeing!)



What else can 'long haul' mean? It depends on who you are and where you start.

At 3 pm on September 12th 2020, Marine AFC kicked off an FA Cup Preliminary round match against Barnoldswick Town. Perhaps their manager, as they were about to leave the dressing room, said 'right, lads, win the next twelve cup games and we're in the final at Wembley next May. But it'll be a long haul'. From the 8th tier of English football, on Sunday at 5 pm, Marine host Tottenham Hotspur in their 8th game, the FA Cup 3rd round proper, after an extraordinary run of success. So far, so good!

Then, Brexit springs to mind: it's been a long haul since David Cameron mistakenly thought the referendum a bright idea, down the wire at the end of December, and still many practical details to be resolved. Some of the unforeseen consequences may be an even longer haul, as pressure for Scottish independence strengthens and the great, even unthinkable, leap towards a re-united Ireland narrows: remember that both Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU. Meanwhile, hit by the double whammy of Brexit and renewed lockdown, many businesses, large and small, face a long haul to recovery if they survive at all.

There is the long haul of rebuilding communities following natural disasters, such as floods, earthquakes and tsunamis: think of the Indonesian tsunami on Boxing Day 2004, the Cumbrian floods of 2015, the earthquake in Izmir, Turkey in October 2020. There are the disasters caused by human negligence: think of Grenfell Tower in London, Union Carbide's plant at Bhopal, India. And there is wanton, terrorist destruction: think of 9/11 in the USA. What is destroyed in seconds or minutes can take months or years to restore, and sometimes never: bereaved families face the long haul of living without loved ones, snatched away in a moment of tragedy.



Long hauls in faith

The exodus of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan, from bondage to a Promised Land, is fascinating. Recent archaeological research affirms the authenticity of their devious route through the Sinai Peninsula, so as to provide water in the desert. Wadi Musa, the modern town in Jordan and site of the ancient city of Petra, means 'valley of Moses'. As the Israelites gathered and set off, did Moses make a speech, 'now, folks, this will be a long haul, but keep the faith and we'll make it'? Well, they weren't always faithful, it became a very long haul and not all of them made it, including Moses.

Into the New Testament, did Jesus and the early disciples, including Paul and his associates, ever consider what a long haul this new faith, to be called Christian, would be? Maybe not: they just lit the blue touchpaper. The first signs weren't promising, after all, but the shaky, flaky foundations became firm enough after the first Easter and Pentecost. Somehow, generation after generation kept and passed on the faith, despite tribulation, persecution, sacrifice and indifference, spreading it across the globe. Is anywhere untouched by Jesus?

Today, as we rue decline in attendance at churches and their closure, do we underestimate the momentum of the long haul of faith? We are 'here for a season, then above' (StF 556, R&S 364, last verse) as our ancestors were and our descendants shall be, and our mission is simply to keep the faith, share the gospel and leave the rest to God. Christ will be followed long after we're gone to glory: not merely a long haul, but eternal.

What does 'long haul' mean to us, now?

Perhaps it began, mysteriously, in March 2020 even if we didn't realise it. It has ebbed and flowed (like the Christian faith), despite assurances from Boris Johnson that we would return to normality by the summer (2020), then the end of July, followed by Christmas and then the spring of 2021, and now we seem to be back where we started, but for more effective medical treatment of the coronavirus and the roll-out of a comprehensive vaccination programme. As I write this, the highest number of daily cases has been confirmed two days running. Lockdowns across the nations of the UK are in force, in England at least until mid-February. The same Mr Johnson now admits that he doesn't know when 'normal' will return. This is indeed the long haul for us all, and especially for people who suffer from so-called 'long covid', a debilitating legacy of illness with uncertain outcomes. It may be that the virus has altered people's daily routines in almost every country in ways that deadlier events – war, famine, genocide – did not: not only a long haul, but a different destination.

So to a very thoughtful reflection from Ken Howcroft on worship and our relationship with God: perhaps in this newly imposed period of lockdown, we can take the opportunity to use the long haul of January and February to think about these important dimensions of our faith and how we express it as the 'new normal' dawns.

John Bell, January 2021. Photo of Sydney from publicity material. Photo by Joan Bell, April 2018, in the desert between Aqaba and Wadi Musa. The hymn quote in StF is 'here for a time and then above', but R&S retains the more familiar words of Charlotte Elliott which also reflect the aspirations of Premier League football teams temporarily relegated to the Championship.

Uncommon worship

Should we be going to church during a pandemic? Or should we be setting an example of living responsibly, carefully and caringly even if we are legally allowed to go? If we do choose to hold services, why? For love of God, love of neighbours, or love of self?

This is a good time to ask what, if anything, we have missed about going to church in the lockdowns. To put it another way, what have our churches not been providing? What many people around the country seem to be missing is seeing people, being with people, talking with people, perhaps sharing a cup of coffee or tea with them. Much less often mentioned are singing together or sharing bread and wine with each other; and almost never, sermons or prayers.

It is not that all these 'social' things that we do together are unimportant. They are vital ways in which the love of God is embodied in and through our relationships. Through them we can experience being 'really' and not just 'virtually' made into Christ's body on earth. What, though, if we have forgotten how to work out what becoming Christ's body will mean for us in practice? What if these 'social' things have become the most important things that we do? It is important to proclaim to the world that people will feel at home amongst us, but is that the only thing that we have to say? Are we only concerned about ourselves and each other when we think of going to church? What about God?

I am worried that we are losing a sense of what worship is, what it is for, and for whom. We are perhaps more comfortable talking of going to church than of going to worship, more at ease in meeting each other than in meeting God. The popular Christmas song from 2009 "All I want for Christmas is you" is apparently already selling well again – and the 'you' who is wanted in it is not God!

There is a sense in which it is right and proper to feel more at ease with each other than with God. It is hard to imagine encountering a God who goes way beyond anything we can conceive. God can disturb us as well as comfort us. It is not right and proper, however, if we make God at best the secondary reason for going to church rather than the primary one.

We offer worship to God. In doing so we allow God to encounter us in the depths of our beings. In worship we make God the centre of our attention. We pay respect to God. We grant worth to God ('worth-ship' being the term from which the word 'worship' derives). In doing so, we discover that God is granting worth to us in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

How, though, are we to make God the centre of our attention? It involves seeking to discern God in our own experience, in each other, in wider human society, and in the natural world. This is not a matter of some of us having 'got' God and then 'giving' God to any of the have-nots whom we consider it appropriate to welcome to our number. The great theologian, minister and President of the Sri Lankan Methodist Conference Daniel T. Niles said that evangelism was one beggar showing another beggar where to provide bread. In the same way, we can say that public worship is some ordinary, vulnerable, messed-up people who in practice often seem to live for much of the time as if God does not exist (the biblical shorthand for which is 'sinners') showing others where to find God – or, perhaps better, where God will find them.



In worship we rehearse the possibilities of God, and how God has been revealed to human discernment. We also rehearse the ways in which human beings experience life and the world around them. We then seek to bring God and human experience of the world together.

There are stories about all these things in the Bible. They prompt us to do make similar links in the here and now, and help us to do it. Making those links, however, will require us to 'get real' both about God and about people's current experience – without being dogmatic about either. We cannot be

dogmatic about God, because God is constantly surprising and transcending our human understanding and expectations. We cannot be dogmatic about other people's experience because people are infinitely varied, and we must avoid assuming and insisting that they all think and feel as we do. Instead, we must listen to them very carefully, and then offer them ways of articulating their experience in a way that is open and non-dictatorial.

In a time of Coronavirus, this means that we particularly need to recover the ability to lament. Lament as we find it expressed in the Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible is the ability to express our pain, anger and distress at what is happening to us, and our lack of understanding about it. It enables us to acknowledge those thoughts and feelings to ourselves, and to articulate them to God. It even enables us to dump them on God or hurl our questions and accusations at God. When we do, we find that God is not so much providing answers or justifications for the way things are, but weeping and lamenting alongside us. Jesus himself is the quintessential example of this. His last words on the cross in Matthew and Mark were to quote the great lament of feeling forsaken by God which comes at the beginning of Psalm 22. In Luke, they were to commit himself to God.

Lament therefore connects at a deep level with trust and praise, even if the words of praise sometimes come through gritted teeth. The fact that God in Christ laments with us is a comfort which changes things for us. Moreover, when we are comforted like that we become able to comfort others in the same way by lamenting and mourning with them (as Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 1:3-4). Blessed are those who mourn, says Jesus in Matthew 5:4, for they shall be comforted.

So in our worship we have to pray not just for others, but also with them. Our churches are at their best when they are communities of openly broken people who are open to be raised to life. When we stand with each other openly in our brokenness, other people from the world beyond the church who are broken by life and experience are able to find a place amongst people who share similar feelings.

We could worship like this when we are together in a private room where we have implicitly closed the doors from the inside for fear of those with authority or influence in society around us. Our church buildings, however, need not necessarily be used like that. The visual images (provided they are not overwhelmingly of stacked chairs and other paraphernalia) and the sense of being a holy place can help people to discern the reality of their own experience and the reality of God. At one church, people of other faiths or none would sometimes come in when no events were happening but the building was open and say that it felt like a prayed-in place. I sometimes wonder if they would definitely have felt the same if they came in when a service was underway.

Alternatively, we could also worship in public spaces, bearing witness that God is at the centre of all things to those who have not yet started to discern it, or who reject the possibility. One thing that we have been learning in lockdown is that worship should also be happening through on-line streaming and in other places where people engage with one another. What is the modern-day equivalent of Lord Soper engaging with people about public issues on Tower Hill and in Hyde Park, not just waiting for people to come into a church building but going to where they are? What prophetic actions could we perform to point people to the possibility of God's grace?

Worship in and for both the wider community and for God – does that have to be uncommon?

Revd Ken Howcroft, November 2020. Ken, now retired to Lichfield, is a former President of the Methodist Conference. In response to the opening questions of Ken's article, Norley Methodist Church is not alone in deciding that, though we are permitted to continue public worship in January, we have chosen not to do so for the time being.

The photo of Daniel Niles (1908-1970) was republished in 2014 as part of the 200th anniversary celebration of the founding of the Methodist Church of Sri Lanka: he was the President of its Conference in 1964, its 150th year.

A Prayer for ourselves

'My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going.

I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end.

Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.

But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.

I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore, will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.'

Having heard it on Radio 4's January 3rd morning service, I am indebted to the Revd Leo Osborn, former President of the Conference, for sharing this prayer of Thomas Merton (1915-1968, a Trappist monk), from 'Thoughts in Solitude'. Photo by Joan Bell of a signpost on the Whitegate Way, Cheshire, May 2020.

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.

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.