

Lockdown Musings 2020

The following is a selection of Kevin's weekly musings that record our journey through the months of the Coronavirus pandemic.

A new normal

(29th March)

In Acts chapter 16 we read how the apostle Paul and his travelling companion Timothy began to share the Gospel in what is now Greece, beginning at Philippi. On the Sabbath they met with a group of faithful people in the open air, alongside a river '*where they supposed was a place of prayer*'. It was likely that this was the only way the local Jewish community could meet, but it did not prevent worship.

As the first churches were established at Philippi and other places, they were meetings of Christian believers hosted by someone who opened their home and led by those called to this role. There were no church buildings, ordained ministry, or even New Testament until much later. Yet this was church.

The impact of the current pandemic has meant that churches have been forced to close their buildings and suspend gathered worship for the first time in about 800 years! Yet we are still Church. Last week it seemed we were closing everything down; this week we are greatly encouraged as new ventures and ways of doing church have begun to emerge. Morning and Evening Prayer have continued to be said online by the local Anglican team ministry and some of us have participated. Elsewhere, some churches have begun to live-stream services; many communities are showing how they might care for vulnerable people at this time. Prayer will continue, and the quality of relationships will define us.

A friend of mine once wrote a short worship song which contains this line: '*This is a holy place, for God has met his people here*' for it is in the coming together of God and people - however, wherever and whenever - that worship happens, and it's not limited to words and music.

This might cause us to re-evaluate the importance of our building and patterns of ministry once normality is resumed... or maybe, having learned from this experience and adjusted our perspective we will discover a new normal!

Give us today our daily bread

(5th April)

So much has changed in a few weeks. Most of us will pause before a meal to thank God for what is before us, and whilst we might remember those with far less, few of us expect our cupboards to be bare. Yet I now find myself genuinely thankful for the food I am about to eat. In our home we have continued to eat very well, for there is no shortage, as supermarkets report almost normal levels of stock now that distribution has increased and panic buying reduced. I even found shopping at a safe distance in a quiet and unhurried Sainsbury's quite a satisfying experience!

But other supermarkets are available... the other day Lesley received an email from the CEO of Morrisons explaining that their stores were now almost fully restocked, restrictions were being lifted and *encouraging shoppers to purchase a few extra items to support our foodbanks*. Sadly many people had come to rely on foodbanks even before the current health crisis, and it is expected that demand will rise as their stocks have been reducing. It is a privilege to spend our money on the food we need; let's remember those whose need is brought into sharp focus at this time.

When Jesus broke five small loaves to feed a hungry crowd there was no limit to God's gracious provision for there were twelve baskets of leftovers. Perhaps in the world into which we emerge after this challenging time, there will be more generosity and kindness when we realise that there actually *is* more than enough for everyone.

This line we say in the Lord's Prayer '*give us today our daily bread*' has been taken to mean not our daily meals but 'the bread of the future kingdom, now' - so perhaps, just perhaps, we might receive what we have been praying for in these days.

When I Survey the Wondrous Cross

(12th April)

It's all a bit confusing, Easter, isn't it? The central character of a gripping story and one on whom so much hope rests is nailed to a cross. His lifeless body then laid in a secure tomb that is later found to be opened and empty. The inability to produce a dead body suggests the eye witness accounts of him alive again are, amazingly, true. And his followers taken from abject grief to ecstatic joy in the space of three days. Why?

Well the cross of Jesus Christ can be viewed many ways and each has its value, but I am particularly fond of these words of Jurgen Moltmann: '*God weeps with us so that we may one day laugh with him*'. Comforting words that we need to hear, especially this Easter.

God will make a way

(10th May)

Recently I was reminded of a story that came from the Second World War. During the dark days of the evacuation from Dunkirk in 1940 the idea of praying for peace each evening was introduced and our people were invited to pray as Big Ben chimed 9.00 p.m. at the start of the BBC radio news. It is estimated that 2 million people joined in this Silent Minute of Prayer. There are many stories about the effects of this time of prayer - a captured Nazi Intelligence officer claimed, "With the striking of your Big Ben each evening you used a secret weapon which we did not understand. It was very powerful and we could find no counter measure." Other reports were from German bomber pilots who saw hundreds of planes coming against them when in fact, there were only two.

Today we face an invisible enemy – Coronavirus; and are enduring the biggest upheaval since WWII. So we have become accustomed to many different ways of life, one of which is standing on our doorsteps at 8.00 p.m. each Thursday to applaud the work of our NHS. At Nether Gardens we are close enough to hear St Mary's bells ringing during this time, a symbol of the Church of Wirksworth standing with our community in prayer. So how about mixing some prayers in with our clapping each week... prayers of thanks, for protection, and that God will lead us out of this pandemic. But whenever, and however we choose to pray, let's not underestimate the power of regular prayer.

Same again?

(24th May)

Someone once said to me 'you know the really great thing about a new church is that there is no tradition... until the second week!' We are creatures of habit and we all have our routines and preferences when it comes to church. I know roughly where you all sit, who will arrive in the last minute, what hymns and songs you like; who comes morning or evening, or both. Then we have our cherished seasonal and annual traditions of which Well Dressing is one. Yet we have had to do it *differently* this year.

Doing things differently is a defining feature of Wellspring and refreshingly so. Whilst we recognise what is of value in our 'traditions' we are not afraid to change or let go. There is a growing acceptance that our post-lockdown world will, of necessity, be different to the one we knew just a few months back. So our Trustees are being challenged to consider what we have learnt during this period, how church life has changed, and what might need to *remain* different once it becomes possible to regather the church.

Just think for a moment about the water that is the central feature in Well Dressing. As a geographer I am in awe of the power of water to transform landscapes as rivers, seas, and as ice – sometimes slowly over hundreds or thousands of years and sometimes in an instant. Then in church life there are periods of gradual change as well as moments of radical transformation beyond which things may never be the same again. Perhaps, through our current circumstances we are in such a moment?

Fired up!

(31st May)

During the lockdown I have been visiting the church building regularly to check it. I now have to flush the toilets and run all the taps so that we don't get Legionnaire's disease when we return! Turning on the hot taps places a demand on the heating system and then I hear the combi boiler start up.

You might recall the old gas fired geyser water heaters that were often found in the kitchens of churches and other public buildings – a small gas flame was kept alight but when the time came for hot water, there would be a 'whoosh' as the complete gas burner fired up.

Well the Holy Spirit is represented in many ways and fire is one of them. On the Day of Pentecost tongues of fire rested upon the gathered disciples and they were 'fired up' to speak about the wonders of God. But it was not as if the Holy Spirit was never there – He is mentioned in verse 2 of Genesis chapter 1 but when the time came for the Church to be empowered it was as though the flame that was always burning in the background went 'whoosh' and the followers of Jesus were made ready for the task ahead. And remember... before this they were in 'lockdown'.

Gathering together

(5th July)

During my day off last week, in between the various stages of sanding and painting our garden benches, I read a short story. 'The Machine Stops' was written in 1909 by E.M. Forster and in our current global circumstances many have found it quite prophetic. Set some time in the future, people live alone and isolated in identical pods below ground, connected to each other via a medium that conveys images and sound. They exist to discuss and share ideas and their needs are met by a series of 'tubes' – they even have a music tube! No physical contact takes place and 'the clumsy system of public gatherings had been long since abandoned'. All this is controlled by a 'machine' whose book is much revered though all religion is considered primitive and unnecessary. Scary...

How much like the world in which we are currently living and being church. We have an interesting word to describe this body of which we are all a part – the New Testament word translated 'church' actually means the *assembly* or *gathering* of a group of people. Now we know that church is really the people and not a building, but there is another important element and that is gathering. Whilst the present circumstances do not make us any less church, we know something is missing. There is a well-known poster used on church noticed boards which says: CH__CH 'what's missing?' UR! And we do miss being together.

Well in the story, the Machine actually stops and people begin to re-discover the world around them, but maybe in a different way. Perhaps this is prophetic too?

One of the skills of prayer walking is to look around and seek inspiration from what is before us. So whilst gathered outside St Mary's graveyard it was recalled how, during the first months of lockdown, the grass had been allowed to grow into a wild meadow before being mostly cut back apart from a few clumps where wild flowers have been left untouched. For when managed or cultivated gardens are left untended it is amazing to see what forms of plant and animal life flourish *because* they get the chance.

Maybe this is picture of what has happened to church during this health crisis. New forms of spiritual life have flourished because we have let ourselves grow. So I wonder what we have noticed?

WELLspring

(19th July)

Last week I received a leaflet from Derby City Mission providing an update on their work and explaining how they are adapting to face the challenges of continuing to reach those in need during this health pandemic. They are getting ready, and say 'together, we must stop the devastating impact of Covid-19 on the most vulnerable, which is immediate but will also be felt for many years to come.' A staggering 180% increase in demand is reported for their Foodbank and Debt & Benefit Advice services. This is set to increase in the foreseeable future as more people become unemployed and budgets already under strain are pushed to breaking point leading to crippling debt, eviction and homelessness. Add in the detrimental impact upon physical and mental health, the trauma of isolation and disruption of normal life as we knew it, and it is clear why we must try to grasp the big picture. If and when this virus becomes contained (and we pray it does) the people amongst whom we live and work will continue to suffer.

But God knows, and chose to come alongside all in our suffering at the Cross. We who are Christ people are to be channels through which this compassion may flow. For our fellowship at Wellspring this is encapsulated in our name and logo - a splash of water rippling outwards... refreshing... cleansing... invigorating. Let's not forget this as we emerge from these 'strange times'. It may help us reshape our focus as a church that reaches out to bring wellness to those around us, and we need to be ready.

Let yourself grow

(26th July)

Last Tuesday we resumed our monthly Prayer Walk. As well as being able to see each other and gather as a small, socially distanced group, it was a joy to step out together in this way once again. As we set off from Wellspring we were reminded of Jesus meeting someone who had not walked for a long time, and how this healing encounter with God will have led them to see the world differently - because we do see things from another perspective when we stand and move around.

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What was it Jesus said? *'Notice how the lilies in the field grow. They don't wear themselves out with work, and they don't spin cloth. But I say to you that even Solomon in all of his splendour wasn't dressed like one of these.'* (Matthew 6:28-29)

Be prepared

(2nd August)

Well I've had a haircut and been to see my parents in South Wales; I've enjoyed trainspotting at Wirksworth railway station again and am awaiting my first swim for several months now that this has become possible. So my four criteria for recovery have almost been met (*see news sheet for 28th June*).

Safe reopening is key to recovery for our society. Our local businesses and leisure amenities are demonstrating that, with careful preparation, it is possible: even one of our church members found 15 seconds of fame on *East Midlands Today*, cleaning door handles on the EVR - all part of getting the trains safely running again, and very much appreciated.

And there is a 'feel good factor'. When I came out of the barbers with a haircut I felt like I had a brand new car, it was *that* good! I expected to turn heads as I returned to Nether Gardens, but in reality I met someone I knew at the pelican crossing who just didn't recognise me.

Then there is church. Preparing to safely reopen for worship and some other activities in September is now our priority. There is work to do and, thankfully, those who are willing to do this *for everyone*. We know it is possible and it will feel good. But be prepared... when we return, some may not recognise us.

Walking on water

(9th August)

There is something about being on water. Whether canoe or cruise liner, island ferry or sailing yacht I have enjoyed the experience of being on the water - the different perspective it brings, the new opportunities it presents, and maybe the sense of being *in control* of it.

But water is a powerful force that must be respected. Last weekend there was a report of a 10 year old boy rescued when swept out to sea, and praised for his awareness of the correct posture to assume, not panicking and calling for help.

In the Bible water can represent chaos and evil. Genesis 1 paints a picture of an earth formless, dark and empty, with deep, raging uncontrolled waters, and it is over this 'the Spirit of God' was hovering in the act of creation, bringing order out of chaos and subduing the water.

So when Jesus walked on the water of the Sea of Galilee and invited Peter to join him what was he doing? If you have read (or seen the film) *The Shack* you will recall the scene where the main character is encouraged by Jesus to walk with him on the water, thereby taking a short cut across a lake! But the original event was not some kind of gimmick... there was always a purpose for Jesus' words and actions.

Countless sermons have been preached on this week's gospel passage and we will be familiar with the encouragement to 'step out in faith', to 'get out of the boat', to 'keep your eyes on Jesus'... all very challenging. But what is it we are to step on? Water; and what could it represent? All the raging uncontrolled circumstances that threaten to overwhelm us. And Jesus calls us to step out and meet him in a place of authority over all this. As he said to Peter: 'Come'.

Rest

(16th August)

During my two weeks' leave I shall go to South Wales and undoubtedly visit one of our favourite beaches. 'Rest Bay' at Porthcawl is a sandy beach with a rugged setting and is popular with surfers due to its waves; and, facing south-west, offers beautiful sunsets over the Bristol Channel. It is a place of frenetic activity, but can be a restful place to sit and relax.

Of the Ten Commandments given by God to Moses, the fourth was a command to rest every seven days in order to keep the Sabbath. Eugene Peterson describes this as '*uncluttered time and space*' and it mirrors the creation account when on the seventh day God rested from His labours. Since we are made in the Divine image, we too should make sure we regularly take time out and get the rest we need.

My favourite illustration for this comes from one of our Baptist Regional Ministers who was once a professional bassoonist. He points out the importance of 'rests' in a piece of music – they indicate when to stop playing and give the music its overall shape. The spaces between the notes are as important as the notes themselves for without rests the music would be incomplete and tuneless – and we would not enjoy it as we should.

What was it Jesus said to his disciples when they were busy with ministry? '*Come aside by yourselves to a deserted place and rest a while*'. (Mark 6:31)

So I'm taking a break now...

Joyful noise!

(13th September)

There has been a strange noise heard from Nether Gardens recently... the sound of young people going to school, and their voices coming from the Anthony Gell playing fields. After many months away they have returned to work and play; it is good to hear.

It is a little like a scene in the short story by Oscar Wilde: '*The Selfish Giant*' (recently made into a film) where the giant, having excluded children from his garden for a while, changed his behaviour and allowed them back. The Narnia-like snow and frost which had settled thawed, the garden blossomed again and the giant began to enjoy seeing and hearing the children play. There are also some Christian allusions in this strangely timely story - and worth reading.

Over the last 6 months Coronavirus has excluded us from so many places that we took for granted but now we are starting to return – some more cautiously than others ('winter' is not over yet) but it is a joy to see and hear. We pray that soon our open doors and our worship will bring joy to our community.

'Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

Worship the Lord with gladness;

come into his presence with singing'. (Psalm 100:1-2)

In the beginning...

(4th October)

'... when God created the heavens and the earth' (Genesis 1:1).

As a young student of earth science I railed against this: the source of heated discussions in the youth fellowship to which I belonged. How can this be when we have such a deep understanding of the physical origins and development of our planetary home, its biosphere and all life? How could it be that a supreme power spoke everything into existence?

But what words: 'And God said...' 'and God saw that it was good' - a steady rhythm through the 'days' of creation in the opening chapter of Genesis giving it a poetic structure. This is an ancient Hebrew celebration of their God as the one who caused everything to be, the one who provides, sustains, and invites humanity into a partnership of nurture and care. It is not a scientific paper explaining 'how God did it'!

Over the years, as a student of both earth science and the Bible, I have come to realise that science and theology can be complementary; they seek to answer different questions of 'how' and 'why', and often there is much overlap. So much so that a modern day Christian poet may write:

Aeons of chemistry, physics, biology

clay in your hands,

Awesome Potter.

Setting the stage for humanity's entrance

stone age to microchip, such

great potential.

No! More than 'a stage', Earth is a biosphere

throbbing and radiant with life,

cosmic jewel.

Cleanse us, remould us, technology harnessed

rescue, restore and revive,

Awesome Potter.

[Gwen Collins – The Methodist Prayer Handbook]

Words we need to hear again and again.

God of the poor, friend of the weak

(18th October)

My attention was drawn to this headline I saw recently on the internet: *'Covid loans will push austerity on poor countries, Oxfam says'*.

Much has been said of the 'collateral damage' the pandemic is wreaking in terms of employment, education, relationships and mental health, and this is tending to affect those who are more vulnerable, those already less well off, and less insulated from the financial shock waves that continue to ripple outwards.

This is also true on the global scale. Many places do not have the medical care and technology available to us in the UK, nor the financial reserves upon which to fall back during this time. Then, as Oxfam explains, poor countries taking up international loans will have to cut back on public healthcare and social protection in order to meet their repayments. So the World Bank has predicted that up to 115 million people will fall into extreme poverty this year, the first increase in over 20 years and – in the words of Oxfam: *'progress against poverty is being set back decades'*.

The Old Testament story of Ruth introduces a destitute foreign woman who threw herself upon a distant and wealthy relative whose response was to *'spread his cloak over her'* (Ruth 3) to ensure that she was looked after. The story is set at harvest time and is a timely reminder of the duty of care we have for the vulnerable in our society, and that we can use our relative wealth to create safety nets for those unable to help themselves.

The message of the Bible is quite clear that those on the margins should not be neglected, and that one of the marks of genuine religion is to take care of the vulnerable (James 1:27). So, as we celebrate Harvest together this year, we choose to remember and support the work of *Jigsaw Foodbank* and *Derby Refugee Advice Centre* with food, with money and with prayer.

'God of the poor, friend of the weak, give us compassion we pray...'

Nothing's too big...

(15th November)

'Nothing's too big, big, big for His power; nothing's too little, little for his care' so go the lyrics of a popular children's praise song *. And it's true! One Thursday I found myself praying for the outcome of the U.S. Presidential Election, our busy Trustees' Meeting that evening, and then a lost dog! Sometimes our prayers seem to focus inwardly on the little things of our lives, perhaps questioning what difference we can make on the big wide stage of this world. At other times we might feel we don't deserve the attention of God when there are so many big problems in the world. Well, it seems that over the course of a few days all those prayers were answered, so perhaps our God cares about it all and wants us to share all in our prayers. The children's song I mentioned above continues with *'God of the big, God of the little, God of the stuff somewhere in the middle; the king of moving mountains loves you more than you will ever know!'* Sometimes it takes the mind of a little child to understand the ways of the kingdom, as Jesus once said (Matthew 11:25).

From its inception and then through years of planning and fund-raising, our Annexe project has seemed like something massive and beyond comprehension that a church such as we should be able to fund and build this; but... as we really are now in a position to start, we can say that nothing is too big for His power! And we pray this will be revealed by the way in which this building is used, touching lives in great and small ways for the Glory of God.

**from 'Nothing's too big, big, big' by Doug Horley © ThankYou Music*

Good News!

(22nd November)

Forty years ago Lesley & I had some Good News! Unknown to each other, we passed our driving tests (in Yorkshire and South Wales) and received our full driving licences. I noted that mine expires in 2032 which seemed a long way off back then! At about the same time I was studying for A Level geography and we considered the impact of rapidly growing dependency upon limited natural resources, and in particular oil, which was forecast to run out *about now*, in the 2020's. Then there was its damaging effect upon the Earth through global warming. But... we were told not to worry because there would be a 'technological fix' i.e. by the time we run out of oil we will have discovered alternative fuel sources, likely to be ones which will be kinder to the natural environment.

So we now find ourselves taking green issues much more seriously at all levels, from embracing EcoChurch at Wellspring to the 'climate plans' adopted by national governments. In the UK it has just been announced that new vehicles powered solely by petrol or diesel will be banned by 2030 and that investment in green infrastructure will be prioritised. The technological fix we were waiting for is arriving - Good News indeed!

I am as much in awe of scientists who are developing all this as I am of the medical and pharmacological researchers who are developing vaccines for Covid-19, THREE of which have been declared highly effective. The Good News for which we have hoped and prayed is arriving!

This week is the final Sunday of the Church year, and next week our thoughts turn again to the promised coming of Jesus - Good News indeed! Another memory from my youth was when the Good News Bible was first published and our Sunday School leaders showed it us, then produced a box of chocolates by the same name and we all enjoyed one. For Good News is to be shared; so let's see if we can share some this coming week!

Blessings

Kevin

