

Lockdown Musings 2021

A selection of Kevin's weekly musings that record our continued journey through the Coronavirus pandemic ...

Bind us together Lord

(10th January)

When I worked in property development one of the important things to look out for when buying or selling land was the existence of any covenants - binding legal agreements that stay with the land and are passed on in any sale. Often quite harmless e.g. ensuring that the front door was always painted black; sometimes amusing e.g. not to keep a boat on the property when a long way from the coast or any navigable body of water; and occasionally quite severe e.g. restricting the development of more than one house on the land. There was little room for manoeuvre; what was agreed was agreed.

Covenant is a very old idea common in ancient civilisation, and used to define political relationships (often between nations) as well as religious ones. 'You will be my people and I will be your God' is an oft repeated phrase in the Old Testament. As Christians we are people of the *New Covenant*, the new agreement between God and humanity made through the death of Jesus Christ, and every year we repeat a promise to serve God together. This last phrase reveals an important aspect of Christian Covenant, that we bind ourselves both to God and to one another - as the early Baptists stated: *'We do solemnly promise in the presence of the Lord and His holy angels to walk with the Lord and with one another in the observation of all gospel ordinances and in the performance of all relative duties in this Church as the Lord shall enable us.'*

This is our prayer as we begin 2021, so as we renew our Covenant today let us be mindful of the relationships we have with each other both within our church and in the wider Christian community, and remember that we are bound together in the love of Christ.

Snow business

(31st January)

I expect we all enjoyed seeing the snow last weekend, even if we didn't all manage to get out to play in it! On Sunday, whilst walking through a snowy sheep field and appreciating the pristine whiteness of snow, I pondered this verse of scripture: *'though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow'* - words uttered by the prophet Isaiah as he began his ministry (*Isaiah 1:18*) - and then wondered what experience the people of that time and place had of snow. Well apparently it does sometimes snow in Jerusalem with the last occasion being December 2013, so this image would not be lost on its original audience. Whilst some might not have experienced snow, most would have understood the significance of sacrificial lambs and the need to know forgiveness in their dealings with each other and especially with God. Just to make the point, this verse continues: *'though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool'* - referring to the predominantly 'white' sheep of the region.

Growing up in South Wales and now living in Derbyshire, I have seen rather a lot of sheep! But it is not the same for all – I have heard of organised trips for city kids to visit ‘the country’ to see livestock for themselves, and appreciate where some of our food and other resources come from.

But what about forgiveness? Whilst most people will possess some kind of moral compass that alerts them to right and wrong, many these days may not have much idea, or need, of receiving God’s forgiveness – and yet both the need and remedy are evident to those who follow Christ. We know that when we come to his Cross and acknowledge this and accept the forgiveness God offers, it is as though we are ‘as pure as driven snow’. No wonder the apostle Paul could write ‘*therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.*’ (Romans 8:1)

No going back

(7th February)

Last week I was able to see inside our church building when I attended a site meeting with our architect and building contractors. From my office at Nether Gardens I have a good view of the outside and have been monitoring progress; but it was quite a surprise to see how much work had been done *inside*. I took some photos (which are now on our website) that show the kitchen and old toilets are gone, there is a gap where the vestry once was, the dais has been removed and we have a big hole in the floor upstairs! As someone said to me: ‘*there’s no going back now!*’

In Exodus the OT people of God, on being liberated from Egyptian slavery, escaped across the sea to the desert of Sinai. Assisted by a miraculously dry crossing, the sea returned behind them and there was no going back to the way things were.

Speaking to would be followers, Jesus said, ‘*No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God*’ (Luke 9:62) and then the Apostle Paul wrote to the young church at Philippi, ‘*this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.*’ (Philippians 3:13-14). Following Jesus is more about looking forward to his kingdom growing and seeing lives and communities transformed than it is about looking back at what we once had or how we used to live. In the words of an old ‘chorus’ I remember from my youth: ‘*I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back, no turning back.*’ * But be prepared for change – inside and out!

* *Mission Praise 272 (Anon)*

Love, love, love...

(14th February)

Well it's THAT date again! The one day of the year when we focus especially on those we love, and sales of chocolates and red roses go through the roof! Back in October 1962 *The Beatles* released their first single: 'Love me do' (just a month or so before I was born!) and it was all quite simple back then... boy met girl, love blossomed and a pop song was written... or was it?

What if boy met boy or girl met girl? We've come a long way in my lifetime, and today falling in love with someone of the same gender and seeking to formalise that relationship through Civil Partnership or Marriage has become quite acceptable in our society, if not yet within our churches.

Last year we began to engage with the Methodist Church's discussion around this issue through the aptly named report 'God in love unites us'. For we worship a God of love who loved the world so much that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will be blessed with eternal life (*John 3:16*) No-one is excluded from such love. And if God does not exclude, then neither should we.

February is LGBT+ history month* - an opportunity to develop awareness of equality and diversity in sexual orientation and gender identity by highlighting the contributions of certain people and noting significant historical milestones. There is much to learn from this and we can become more inclusive; then hopefully the world of 2062 will be a different place, with no need to occasionally wear rainbow shoe-laces...

* <https://lgbtplushistorymonth.co.uk/>

Love hurts

(21st March)

As I write I have spent an entire day at home. Not because of Lockdown or the weather, but because I have hurt my back. I know that a combination of deep heat, painkillers and rest should sort it out so the discomfort and mild pain will be temporary. I am conscious that this is not the case for others. About 18 months ago a colleague of mine suffered a stroke that left him with *locked in syndrome* at the age of 46, but thankfully he has managed some recovery - recently I have seen videos of him walking and shaving, and he has written a book!

Yet for so many who suffer, and in particular those who have suffered the impact of Covid-19, there has been no such outcome and people will continue to suffer both directly and indirectly for many years to come.

The suffering of others far exceeds my own 'pain threshold' but thankfully not God's. This Sunday takes its name from a Latin word for suffering and has been used by the Church to describe the events surrounding the crucifixion of Jesus when he endured unfathomable suffering, for us all. As the apostle John wrote: '*This is what love is: it is not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven*'. (1 John 4:10). This is love... and it hurts.

New Beginnings

(28th March)

As one of the younger and less vulnerable members of the congregation, I have now had my jab. I chose to go to the vaccination centre at St John's Methodist Church in Allestree – and what a lovely set up it was. The waiting area was in the worship space and the vaccination booths in a side hall. I was even greeted by a minister in dog collar (an Anglican priest from Ilkeston), so it all felt very normal to me. After a short wait it was jab done.

Then there was what I chose to wear. It needed to be something which gave easy access to my upper arm, so I wore a short-sleeved white shirt that I keep for baptisms (as it is easy to remove quickly when soaking wet). Even this seemed to be symbolic of the new beginnings offered to *all* by this vaccine programme.

I am in awe of this technological achievement, together with the speed at which it has been developed and is being administered to our people. But we must not overlook those further down the queue - we need to ensure that vaccines are given to all where ever they are in this world, as soon as possible.

As the BBC said when reporting from the vaccination centre at Westminster Abbey: *'Safe and effective vaccines will answer all our prayers to be delivered from this pandemic.'* And we thank God for this new beginning.

Familiarity

(18th April)

Last Saturday I woke up excited - it felt like Christmas Day! And it was! Lesley and I were going to meet with our family for the first time since August. We exchanged Christmas presents, ate, drank and went for a muddy dog walk in the Northamptonshire countryside.

So yes it felt like Christmas. It also felt like Easter... with that sense of renewal that so many of us have begun to experience as Lockdown is progressively eased. Other significant personal milestones anticipated this week are a haircut and starting back at the gym and swimming pool. It's all a bit unfamiliar, but quite exciting.

The weeks following the death and resurrection of Jesus were quite unfamiliar... it is not usual to be walking and talking with someone who was dead! Yet there are many testimonies recorded in the Bible that this happened with individuals, couples, the disciples and larger groups of Jesus' followers. It was very exciting and almost became familiar.

I always remember going to a Christian youth event when the leader spoke about Jesus saying: *"he's still alive you know, I was only talking to him this morning!"* How exciting to be that familiar with our Risen Lord.

Changes

(25th April)

Last Tuesday we resumed our *Prayer Walk*, and as we made our way along St John Street we noted how many shops and other buildings had been vacated or changed hands with some well-known traders moving to different premises and one building being converted to apartments. To adapt and change has been necessary.

Our ultimate destination was our cemetery where we delighted in how well it is being kept, whilst noting the many changes made over last year; and there are plans for more.

Change is inevitable. Resisted by some and embraced by others, change will always be with us. Just over a year ago we were forced to adapt to seismic changes in the way we behaved, worked, socialised and worshipped. Indeed some might be always with us, for in many ways we simply cannot undo what we have been through and revert to how things used to be.

Then there is our Annexe - a massive change to our physical building and to the facilities we have at our disposal. To adapt and change has been necessary. As well as providing much needed additional space for church and community, we have recognised it is necessary to adapt and change how we *are* church and how we *do* church. When the time comes to occupy our new space, we need to be ready for this.

Over two thousand years of the Christian Church there have been plenty of moments of seismic change – the time following the resurrection of Jesus set the stage for this. Around AD 50 in Thessalonica it was said of the Apostle Paul and his missionary team: ‘*These people who have been turning the world upside down have come here also*’ (Acts 17:6 – NRSVA). And we also have a mission.

Ar Lan y Môr

(2nd May)

Once when walking through the *Puzzle Gardens*, I made an inappropriately loud comment about how difficult it would be to live there with no vehicular access and residents needing to carry their shopping and everything else to their front doors, and then what about removals? To which one of the residents replied: ‘*Yeah and ya don’t get a sea view either!*’ I was quite bemused...

Living in Derbyshire we are about as far from the coast as possible. But I do like to see the sea; perhaps it is something about being born in a sea-side town and living about 5 miles from the coast in South Wales. Well last week I was able to make a first visit to Wales since September and, amongst other things, I made a point of going to my favourite beach - the only problem was the tide was right in, so there was no sand and all sea. We just sat on the rocks for a while and watched the waves coming in - very relaxing.

It often occurs to me that when we reach our coastline it all stops: there are no roads or traffic; everything that fills our lives is mostly behind us. Unless we are to swim or get on a boat, we can go no further. I find this sense of there being a *limit* quite satisfying, for perhaps when we recognise the finite limits of human activity we can encounter our infinite God. And in case you are wondering what the phrase above means, it says ‘*Beside the sea*’; from a traditional Welsh folk song. And I do like to be *ar lan y môr*.

Amazing Grace

(23rd May)

Last weekend I went to be fitted for a wedding suit in readiness for our son's wedding. The outfitters were found in Olney, Bucks (not far from Newport Pagnell where Jonathan and Sarah will get married in July). This is a small town well familiar to us, but as we drove in I noticed there was a new sign! It said *Olney - Home of Amazing Grace*. A reference to John Newton who was once curate at St Peter and St Paul in Olney, and during his time there in the late 18th century wrote a great many hymns with his friend William Cowper, such that there was even an *Olney Hymnbook*! Of course, the best known is Newton's '*Amazing Grace*', and visitors come from all over the world to explore the story behind its writing.

The grace of God is truly amazing. There are over 300 references to the word 'grace' in the Bible. This word conveys the unmerited favour and mercy of God that the Apostle Paul says is the basis of salvation and nothing for which we can ever take credit. (*Ephesians 2:8*). This is what John Wesley experienced one May evening in 1738 at a meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, when he felt his '*heart strangely warmed*' as he felt he '*did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation*'. Now the experiences of which Newton, Cowper, and the Wesleys wrote were a long time ago, but the grace of God is not limited to place, time or people – we can and do experience God's grace in Wirksworth today, and many will testify to this.

Perhaps we should put a sign outside our building when we move back in saying *Wellspring – home of Amazing Grace!*

Something new

(30th May)

So now Well-dressing week is upon us. I had never heard of this practice until I came to Wirksworth and during my first year here I tried my hand at the various stages of producing our wonderful displays. Learning something new can really help us move out of our comfort zone, and when mastered can make us feel good about ourselves as we make progress. Apparently it's all in our brain chemistry. There have been many occasions in my life, work and ministry when I have had to learn a new skill, and I know the feeling.

So now I am about to embark on something new – a *working Sabbatical*. I've never done this before and it will be all new to me. My plans and ideas have been shared with the church, and whilst for most of this time we shall (hopefully) be emerging from the restrictions under which we have had to live for the last 14 months, I do hope to make progress with most of these.

Yet I am conscious of one thing I do need to learn, and that is to *rest*. Our word *sabbatical* comes from the Biblical word for the time of rest God's people were expected to regularly practise, as a reflection of the way the Creator is shown to rest from work in the stories of beginnings. So let us pray that we will learn to practise Godly rest.

Peace to you, Kevin