

HEY JUDE!

THE NEWSLETTER OF ST JUDE'S CHURCH, WOLVERHAMPTON
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A LOCKDOWN SERIES



RECEIVING, LIVING AND SHARING CHRIST AS LORD
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A Lockdown Diary *Editor's Note*

To say this has been unprecedented times is to understate the obvious. People have posited various theories and conspiracies on how the pandemic may not be real and or may be a cover up for something more sinister. Where ever our inclinations lie, the entire world was held hostage for months because governments and individuals everywhere deemed it fit for us to stay home, protect ourselves and save lives. Some of us had the chance to prepare, some of us were so thrown by the lockdown that we experienced panic on varying levels. But we can all agree that the past three month have been an unexpected time in the history of the world.

As with all global occurrences on such a large scale, the course of our lives has been changed forever. Too many people have lost their lives, or been affected via a friend, a relative, a neighbour. Many people have been on the front lines on various stages, experiencing the scourge of the pandemic first hand. But the majority of us have had to handle our daily and seemingly mundane lives in the face of such a catastrophic global event. Some of us have handled the lockdown well, some have enjoyed growth, insight, inspiration, comfort, blessings. Some of us have endured pain, misery, loneliness, anger, depression, hopelessness. And some of us have experienced a mixture of emotions from both sides of the spectrum; good and bad.

But one thing binds us together; and it is that we have each experienced the lockdown in our own way. And as much as these individual experiences bind us together, the *telling* of these stories strengthens our bonds and increases our sense of 'fellowship' without physically being in the same place.

So here is the first of the **Lockdown Series**, a small coalition of some of our individual thoughts and experiences during the lockdown and its aftermath. We would love to have another series in this publication so please feel free to send your thoughts, testimonies, prayers and experiences directly to me or to Phil, if that is easier.

May these words light a torch in our hearts, fire a passion in our bones, and put smiles on our faces. And may they remind us that we are certainly not alone, no matter how the lockdown has affected us. We are in this, together.

Deborah Atteh

A Lockdown Testimony

It was Saturday April 25 2020. I got up feeling down in heart and in mind. There were things to do but I just had no heart to do them. It was a lovely sunny morning, so I thought to go outside. I went and sat on the bench in the garden, not a good thing, it only brought back memories of Lee and myself sitting there with our tea putting our family and the world to light as we thought. Then, it is hard to say and explain what happened next, it was like some light awakening in me and I can only say God opened my eyes in what was like a tunnel vision. It took my eyes up to the top of our garden where the small cherry tree ablaze covered in lovely white and pink blossom and at the side two Camellia bushes also showing large red flowers, even the little white daisies, the dandelions sparkling in their golden yellow and a patch of self seeded blue forget-me-nots all growing because

the grass had not been cut. My heart was soaring and my lips praising what a wonderful, beautiful world the Lord has given us.

Then I remembered Lee had a music disc by Louis Armstrong 'What a wonderful world'. I went into the house, my mind reflecting on what I had seen, a very new appreciation of things I had seen so many times before. Lee's records had not been played since he died and the first one was 'Sacred Songs' by Chris Tomlin and the first hymn 'Indescribable You placed the stars in the sky and you know them by name, You are amazing God.' The rest of the hymns were some I knew so I had a lovely sing-along. Then I put on 'What a Wonderful World'. But the third one was a Jamaican Gospel. One time we went to visit Lee's Mom we bought this and that evening as usual we all sat on the veranda, the heat had gone out of the day, dusk was falling, no street lights because she lived about three miles out of Lucea Town. The memory of bullfrogs croaking, crickets whistling and fireflies twinkling as they flew about them across the road, the sea calm and still. That time we had taken down a small portable disc player as a gift for someone. Lee put on the disc and as it played he touched my hand to look at Mom. Sitting in her wicker armchair, shawl round her shoulders, eyes closed, smile on her lips, tapping her feet. Granny Jim as all in the district called her, lived a very simple life, did not watch TV or record player. She was very happy with her little radio. I was full of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord for bringing those happy memories back to me.

Then on the Monday morning Amita phoned to catch up and ask if I had heard the Archbishop's message on the phone, gave me the number so after we said goodbye I phoned. The Bishop gave words of encouragement, a prayer and then a hymn 'How great thou art'. The next little talk began about scientists who first used the Hubble telescope pointed to what they thought was emptiness in space but were amazed at the mass of stars there. Thank you Lord for those wonderful experiences, happy memories and a lesson for me to remember.

Hebrew 13 v 5B: *Be content. He will never leave you or forsake you.*
Amen amen! Praise the Lord!

Beryl Stephens

A Testimony through lockdown

When I became a Christian at the age of 17 I was searching for acceptance and love. I remember one of several verses at the time really struck me; *"If anyone is in Christ he is a new creation, the old has passed away, behold the new has come"* 2 Corinthians 5:17.

I desperately wanted that to be true. But as the first huge emotional joys of becoming a Christian wore off, the realities of life, and particularly my own struggles with it, resurfaced.

The gnawing darkness within had not gone, and the depression that resulted from it only grew darker as I saw the new life I was called into, and the old life that still held me. It would be many years before I understood one of the main roots of that darkness.

Childhood abuse had left wounds so deep that even the following long years of therapy and prayer would not heal. The scars remain. Deep scars fade with time, but they do not disappear.

Years of striving to be a good Christian, a good wife, a good mother followed. Determined to keep going, terrified that people would discover the awful person I really was, and how full of darkness. Convinced of only one thing; that I was a failure at everything I attempted, and not fit even to be alive.

What I was missing was GRACE. Not that I had not heard of it, accepted it in my head, or even spoken about it with enthusiasm to others. But the truth did not reach my heart. The truth that the Good News of the Gospel is nothing to do with how good or bad I am, how hard I try or don't try, whether I am successful or a failure.

The truth is I am **not** good enough, and no amount of trying, successes, or failures will make any difference.

No, I am saved, I am counted as a child of God purely and only through what Jesus has done for me, dying and rising again in full and perfect payment for my sin.

When I put my trust in him, and in the saving, redeeming work of the cross, then I am his. Nothing can snatch me from his hand. No amount of failures, wrong decisions, sinful actions, once repented of, can tear me away.

Once adopted as a child of God I cannot be un-adopted. I may act like I am not part of the family, I may fail terribly, but I am still his. The difficulty lies in walking in the light of that. Finding the balance of knowing it is not by my efforts, yet making every effort to please him, walk in his ways, and glorify him in my life.

In the past dark months of lockdown at first I forgot all these things. Afraid, confused and uncertain I did the one thing I have always been inclined to do –go into “cope mode”. Rather than face the emotions head on, or pause to reflect, I threw myself into doing everything I could to help others, constantly driven by the fear that I was not doing enough.

The first days and weeks of lockdown were filled with miles of walking, posting cards offering help as a church to almost all the houses in the parish. As phone calls came in we delivered food parcels and shopped for others. As demand increased a food bank store began to form in our hallway, with some people bringing food to distribute, whilst others came to take what was needed. The Well food bank was overwhelmed and many were falling through the net of bureaucracy in their needs so referrals came to us. Thankfully we always had enough donations to be able to take parcels as needed.

In the meantime, Phil and I were thrown headlong into a steep technological learning curve as we wrestled with how to bring St Jude's church to people's homes through lockdown. An intense mixture of learning how to do YouTube talks, send email links to those who had email, and producing prayer sheets to post out to everyone who did not, and then continue to produce relevant prayers, thoughts and talks for everyone each week in these different forms. J team (Sunday school) were invited to join their own WhatsApp group, with bible stories, craft and quizzes posted each week.

In those early days the phone never seemed to stop ringing, days off became a thing of the past, and for both of us, everything was physically and emotionally exhausting for a while. All this was compounded by Phil breaking his elbow, and then struggling with a resurgence of his trigeminal neuralgia, medication making concentration ten times more difficult.

Then there was the school I have continued to work in throughout lockdown with key worker children. Here we all had to learn to adapt as rules kept changing and numbers of pupils kept growing. Trying to teach children too young to understand how to social distance and to wash their hands regularly for longer than the token rinse remains a mission! Sounds of “Happy Birthday to You” echoing from the children’s toilets will stay with me for a long time...

Trying to find some kind of balance of normal work and (distanced!) play has been very difficult. Both they and the teachers have had to struggle with high levels of anxiety and stress that will have an emotional impact for a long time to come.

Whilst all the things we have been doing over the last months have been necessary and much needed, I have begun to realise (again!) how I have thrown myself into “doing” not “being”, never allowing myself to stop. If I stopped, I would have to face the churning emotions of all that has been happening in the past months. The loss of physical contact with family and friends. The loss of being able to meet physically to worship, learn and pray together as church. The loss of routines of so many different kinds. Many have had far tougher times than us, and listening to some of their stories is heart-breaking. Having to listen from a distance is even harder.

In the past I pushed down the deep emotions and pain of my childhood by dissociating from it all, pushing feelings of any kind out, and throwing myself into physical and mental activity to keep those feelings blocked. The trauma of the past few months has elicited the same learned responses in me.

Dissociation is something we all do at different levels, especially in times of crisis. Now that lockdown is easing is it time to begin to face the emotions that churn inside. Not to sink under them, but to bring them to our heavenly Father, knowing that he will not let us drown, but will instead hold us in his loving arms and bring the re- assurance of his presence, where, if we stopped long enough to listen, he has always been, -right here, holding us in the midst of our pain.

Nicky Robertson

The Dark Night of the Soul

If a fellow brother or sister in the Lord were to tell us that they had experienced ‘The dark night of the soul’, I wonder how we would react. Would we do the following:

- Tell them that they were talking nonsense?

- Treat them in a condescending manner?
- Trivialize their experience and tell them to snap out of it?
- Exhort them to work harder at prayer, Bible study and worship?
- Exhort them to go to Christian events or conferences such as Spring Harvest, New Wine?
- Or would we sit down, listen to them, support them, be a good friend, and pray for them?

Hopefully we would choose the last options, but empathy is a precious commodity. Sadly, it is lacking in some Evangelised Christian circles.

So what is ‘The dark night of the soul’? It is a phrase coined by the great saint, St. John of the cross. It is basically when you feel that God has totally deserted you. Now if you have never felt this way, don’t read any further!

We know, of course, that God never ever deserts us. In Matthew 28:20 Jesus promised His disciples, and us, that He would be with us ‘to the end of the age’. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us in Chapter 13 verse 5 that God has promised never to leave us or forsake us.

So far so good, but, sooner or later in our walk with the Lord, we are going to experience a time when we feel (and I emphasize *feel*) that God is far away from us. We must be realistic about this. To pretend otherwise is to live in ‘cloud cuckoo land’.

The ‘dark night of the soul’ could last for days, weeks, months or years. It does not sit well in some Evangelised Christian circles where there is a ‘triumphalistic’ culture which insists that we should always be ‘on top of the world’. Also, being in the ‘dark night of the soul’ will not necessarily be helped by ‘triumphalistic’ worship songs, or, as some would advocate, the ‘Baptism of the spirit’. At times we are so casual about the way we talk about God the Holy Spirit.

We are going to go through ‘The dark night of the soul’ when life goes horribly wrong – finances collapse, relationships go to pieces, our health fails, pressures of life set on top of us, prayers go unanswered.

At times I experience a low blood count. It means a slight reduction of white blood cells in my body. Mercifully, this condition is not dangerous. However, when it happens, I lose interest in everything, my appetite suffers, I have little ‘get up and go’, life becomes a drag, Bible readings and prayers is hard going. I experience ‘The dark night of the soul’.

I bet that during the recent lockdown, due to the coronavirus, many brothers and sisters in the Lord have gone through this ‘dark night’ experience. I certainly have. Reading scripture will show us that those who walked closely with God also went through this experience. Look at David, a man who really loved God, a man God honoured as ‘a man after my own heart’. In the many Psalms he is often complaining that God is absent. For example, in Psalm 13:1 he cries

*“How long, o Lord?
Will you forsake me forever?
How long will you hide your face from me?”*

Look at Job, experiencing extreme suffering, feeling that God was absent, but hanging on in there. (Job 23:8-10)

Our Lord Himself experienced the 'dark night of the soul' in the extreme form on the cross. (Matthew 27:46)

William Cowper, that great hymn writer who was prone to severe mental illness, wrote these words

*"Where is the blessedness I know
When first I saw the Lord?
Where is the soul-refreshing view
Of Jesus and His word?"*

Now how would that go down in the shallow 'happy clappy' culture that too often can be seen in the church?

So what can we do when experiencing 'the dark night of the soul'?

If it is due to unconfessed sin that God has highlighted, the quicker we 'come clean' to God, the better. David spent the most part of a year covering up his sin after committing adultery with Bathsheba and having her husband murdered. I bet he was not happy during that time. See what he says in Psalms 32:3-5.

Otherwise realize that God is disciplining us by testing our faith. (See Hebrew 12:5-11). It's hard, it's not fun, it's tough but God loves us because he loves us and sets a high value on our faith in Him.

It's often a question of dogged perseverance – putting one foot in front of the other, 'hanging on in there'. It's keeping up with the discipline of reading God's word and pouring out our hearts to him in prayer regularly. Let's be gentle with ourselves. Perhaps during the 'dark night' we could take smaller doses of Bible reading and other spiritual disciplines. After all we can't cope with huge meds when we take ill, until we get better, can we?

There is light at the end of the tunnel, although it may a long wait. Look at David's words in Psalms 40:1-3

*I waited patiently for the Lord
He turned to me and heard my cry
Out of the mud and mire;
He set my feet on a rock
And gave me a firm place to stand
He put a new song in my mouth
A hymn of praise to our God
Many will see and fear
And put their trust in the Lord.*

Brian Titton.

To All My Neighbours

Having lived in the close for nearly 50 years, I only knew a few of my neighbours. But suddenly when the lockdown came a lot of them rallied round to help me. Especially Carla at No. 6. She has just qualified at Wolverhampton University, has 2 children one 12 and the other girl 5 just started at St. Jude's.

Knocked on my door and offered to shop for me at Sainsbury's. She is my angel, otherwise I would starve. She gets in her white car at 7:30 before her shift at New Cross and gets all my shopping once or twice a week. Everything is perfect.

How can I ever repay her?

Sheila Parkins

Grapes of hope

After several months of his staying in the camp of refugees, Omar managed to get a small grape vine plant, so he dug a pit and then planted it near his miserable tent, around which people inhabited in the camps. The residents gathered around Omar and laughed at him, "What is this? Do you think we will stay here forever?!" "Its grapes must be sour, ha-ha?!" "Man, we need bread, not trees!"

The days went by and Omar cared about this small plant, watering it, sitting near for hours, remembering his large house and the bunches of grapes hanging from the vine of his house. During his stay in the camp, Omar had a child, and he called her "Dalia", which means in Arabic, vine. Both 'children' Dalia and vine grew together, when Dalia started crawling, the small plant branched as well. When she pronounced the first words "papa and mama", Omar noticed that vine yielded small sour grapes.

After eight years, this vine with its green leaves and clusters of red grapes, became a resting place for Omer and his daughter Dalia while his wife began harvesting its leaves in order to wrap them and make dishes from them. When the vine began to give more fruits, Omar took the clusters from them and shared with the camp residents, and one day as a crowd of people were setting under the vine, Omar looked at them and said, "This is how to plant hope, my friends, each of us carries the seed of hope, but he does not know how and where to sow it!". The face of people turned red in shame, while a big smile shone on his daughter's face. Dalia asked her father, "What will happen to this vine if we return home, daddy?!" The father stood in the middle of the vine, picking a small cluster of them, and he answered, "As long as this vine keeps and gives us its grapes, it will be our homeland, my dear daughter, because a bare tree which has no shade, no fruit and no green twigs is like a lifeless body that awaits burial in the cemetery!"

Mohammad Ali

Lockdown Birthday

In April I was 90 and had booked to take family and friends to dinner at The Lindens. My son Jonathan and Kath (whose birthday is the same date as mine) and my nephew Tim were coming over from Australia for a few weeks. I was counting the days longing to see them again. Around Christmas time Kath was very ill with her asthma. The doctor said both she and Jonathan who is diabetic, were at high risk of catching this strange illness that was spreading. Eventually they had to cancel coming. I was heartbroken, though I truly believed that this was all part of God's plan. Having sent out most of my invitations, with some still to do I had to cancel the booking due to the world's largest uninvited guest! After a lot of thought and prayer I decided I would ignore my birthday weekend, not speak to anyone, just read books and feel sorry for myself. God had other plans!

When I heard the word corona all I could think of was the pop man who came with his horse and cart selling bottles of lemonade and ginger ale, when I was very small.

On 25th, the morning of my birthday, Tim phoned me at 7am wanting to be the first to wish me a happy day. All the week I had had cards and parcels arriving which I never open before the day.

I had phone calls all morning including a quick one from my daughter Catherine saying "I'll phone you again at 11.55am and don't be on the phone to anybody else". Soon after this Phil and Nicky came bearing gifts and Nicky had made me a birthday cake. She took a photograph of me in my porch, I was surprised and said I must go back in I'm expecting a phone call. On time Catherine phoned and asked, "Have you got any shoes on?" Which I thought was a ridiculous question. Then she told me, "Go outside down the path at 12 o'clock not a minute before or a minute after. Just dead on 12 o'clock." Like the obedient old mother, I have grown into, I obeyed!!

When I stepped outside, I saw lots of people all keeping their 2 metre distance and thought there had been an emergency, a fire or a gas leak. Everyone was clapping and shouting birthday greetings. I did not know whether to laugh or cry. When I reached the pavement, they joined together to sing 'Happy Birthday' to me. In all the 60 year I have lived here I had never known so many people outside on the grass. Birthday cards, flowers etc were being put into the hedge for me. Catherine had apparently put a request on a local Facebook page saying if anyone was doing their daily walk around that time, could they please walk past number 19 at 12 o'clock. Many of the people who came I didn't know, but God has provided me with a new circle of local friends who call out "Hello Joan how are you?" when I go out for a walk. I don't know their names yet but I will get to know them when lockdown is over.

Gail (my sister who lives next door) and her husband Ray had put birthday stickers on the door. Soon after I came back indoors my niece Tara phoned and again I went outside. Tara and her three children were there. Jacob was taking photographs and Emily and Oliver were holding rainbow drawings for me, supporting NHS. These are now on the porch windows. I went indoors and cut some of the delicious lemon drizzle birthday cake from Nicky to share it with my young visitors.

Just as I was going to bed at 11pm Jonathan phoned. He had been trying to get me all day (night in Australia) but he couldn't get through.

God said 'I know the plans I have for you.' So I thank Him, Catherine and all my family and friends for a wonderful Birthday.

God bless all who read this, keep safe, and feel the loving arms of God around you.



Joan Lloyd-Davies

Memories Nest

During the fight against the pandemic, when we were on lockdown and distancing ourselves from the rest of the world, aside from my study and spending time with my family I shifted my focus to nature, singing with birds, dancing with butterflies occasionally and sitting under splendid yet warm sunshine.

I thought everything will remain unchanged. But one day an ear-splitting sound which almost pierced my ears made me feel these peaceful days will soon come to end. After this catastrophic moment passed, I learnt that the immense tree next to our house had been cut down to let the household enjoy the sunshine.

When I went to my garden, I saw a little heartbroken bird sitting next to the collection of broken branches and leaves. A short conversation between me and the bird happened in my mind. I asked the bird why are you sitting alone? He replied to me: I have built my house with my own strength and spent so much time to do that. I am sitting here because I cannot bear the fact that my house has been completely ruined in only few seconds

I knew that the bird was sad and angry because its house was destroyed. I pitied him thus begged my parents to let me look after it. After a long time of begging I won the fight against my parents 😊 as a result I brought the bird in and gave it food, water, house and a name. I have called it Joly.

However, my happiness did not last long as I begin to feel an ominous aura around Joly, but I did not know why. My parents asked me to let it go and have its freedom and so I let it go but I still did not know why. Few days later while looking at our garden I came to realise the similarities between me and Joly. We both were forced to leave our house for same reasons. I left because we were forced to leave as the war broke out and Joly had to leave as its house been completely ruined.

I could not stop myself from crying until my parents came and told me that although my intention was good but memories unlike clothes, we cannot change it easily, cannot be bought with money or thrown away after getting bored. I came to know that it was very difficult for Joly to let go of his memories although his house is no longer there.

Sigal Ali

Lockdown - A New Experience

As we go through life we have different experiences, some are welcome, others we could have done without. Many of those experiences apply to us as individuals but may also involve family, colleagues or friends. This current pandemic and its consequences for people across the world is one of those experiences that affects everyone to one degree or another, depending on age or health conditions.

Anyone of my age (?), the restrictions put upon us have been, and still are, relatively demanding. Initially we were not allowed out, and then we were told we could go out for brief exercise as long as we kept a social distance from other people. The next stage came

with the announcement that people living alone could visit the home of another family member or friend. That was most welcome news.

As I am writing this, our Prime Minister has announced we will be able to get our hair cut from July 4th onwards. Never been such times!! Churches will also be allowed to open for communal worship, but probably no singing.

The effects of this virus and the change it has brought to our behaviour and life style has no boundaries. Everyone, from children upwards have been going through significant and unwelcome changes in their daily lives. However, when we stop to reflect upon what it has been like in these past months, there have been some positive and beneficial times which we may not have had otherwise.

I have been helped immensely by my neighbours who have done shopping for me, an act of kindness indeed. The weeks we clapped for NHS also provided opportunity to chat with neighbours, at a distance, as opposed to saying "hello" as we pass them by.

The VE Day celebrations was another example of neighbours gathering together for coffee and biscuits in one of their front gardens, spaced out of course, and sharing our different experiences of the lockdown and getting to know something more about each other.

With this lockdown and self-isolating I expected time to drag, but for me so far, the days and weeks seem to go by just as quickly as any other time. There have been opportunities to do those jobs which I had kept putting off and to telephone friends and relatives that I had not contacted for a long time.

Not being able to meet together for worship is something that most, if not all Christians miss immensely. Although the opening of churches for private prayer has been welcomed it is not the same as being together to sing, pray, listen to God's word and of course have tea or coffee afterwards.

What has been remarkable is the number of churches that have live streamed on the internet acts of worship and short talks based on the Bible. I have heard that a number of people who have no connection with a church, have tuned in to these virtual events and consequently made enquiries about the Christian faith. Of course not everyone has access to the internet.

As if this pandemic is not enough we have all been made aware of the extent of racism in our world, in our nation and in the Church worldwide, through the death of George Floyd in the USA. Within the congregation and fellowship of St. Jude's we have people of different colour and race. We enjoy and appreciate the friendship we have with each other, but for the white people in our church, whom I am sure are well aware of the racism that still rages in our world, it is easy to forget or not fully appreciate what our black, Asian and ethnic minority friends have been through and no doubt still experiencing. Let us thank God for the privilege of knowing these dear people and bring them to God in our prayers each day. All of us are part of God's family and therefore are brothers and sisters.

As Christians let us remember that God our Father, Maker and Redeemer knows all about what each of us are going through in these days. In our prayers let us ask God for his mercy, his healing and strength.

Psalm 42 v 11 says "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Why so disturbed within me?" (Or as Eugene Peterson puts it in 'The Message' "Why are you down in the dumps, dear soul? Why are you crying the blues?") "Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Saviour and my God."

Ivor Saunders

March 2020 lockdown during the coronavirus outbreak – a personal reflection

My, how time flies. I heard on the radio that today (30th June) is our 100th day of lockdown. I wonder how it has been for you. Best made plans replaced with winging it from day to day. Life on the hoof. One minute exciting, the next total drudgery. An avalanche of guilt inducing bright ideas spewing out of the media, traditional and social, hit me every moment of the day as I'm told how I could help others and fill my time with healthy and meaningfully activity. Now, as the long days of lockdown set, the quick bounce back longed for by our Prime Minister is obliterated by the shadows of reality – a shattered economy, grieving families, and the future of young people sacrificed on the altar of saving the elderly and infirm.¹

Where is God in this? You may ask, or not, for God appears distinctly absent from government daily briefings, media analysis, and general conversation. I'm losing track of how many people tell me they used to go to church but do so no longer because, "I have more important things to do... I just don't have time now I have family of my own... you don't need to go to church to pray... and so on and so on..." We have just been through, and continue to pick our way through, the biggest shake up to the world during my lifetime and yet the spiritual significance of it is, I am told, a matter for private personal reflection in the quiet of our homes, or out alone in nature, or in the ether of online services and profound sound bites of spiritual insight. It just seems odd. Has an atheistic utopia finally arrived? Who needs God when we have the NHS to save us and we can all show kindness to one another?

1. *This final point may, at first reading, sound incompassionate, but it is a thought that has been buzzing round in my head since reading an article by Dr John Pilling and Bishop Michael Langrish entitled "It's all about Mercy". In the article they explore what a merciful response to coronavirus would look like across all of society, not just for those in immediate urgent need. You can read it on line at: [www.It's all about mercy - Anglican Mainstream \(2020-06-30 09_57_04\).html](http://www.It's%20all%20about%20mercy%20-%20Anglican%20Mainstream%20(2020-06-30%2009_57_04).html). Furthermore, much as I might like to deny it, I am rapidly joining the category of 'Elderly.' It was brought home to me recently when I heard a father say to his young son as I walked past them, "Come on son, stand aside for grandpa!"*

The Bible makes a bold claim, “God has made everything beautiful in its time” (Ecclesiastes 3:11). What is the beauty God is making out of this troublesome godforsaken time? For many, it clearly feels like an irrelevant question because he is so hard to spot. I would count myself among those having difficulty seeing the beauty of the moment when such darkness has arisen and looks set to continue for some time. What is the point of looking? Well, I am profoundly aware that God’s perception of beauty is far removed from the many sweet dreams we are told, time and time again, to expect in this life. This week I felt God show me something that opened my eyes to his understanding of beauty and perfect timing in a new way. It came unexpectedly in the footnote to a commentary on Psalm 44 (how unlikely is that?).

Psalm 44 is about the pain of the innocent suffering and the injustices of life. If any part of the bible can offer a ray of hope, it might be found here. The commentator, Gerald Wilson, draws out the contemporary significance of this ancient poem. When considering verse 22 (which reads, “Yet for your sake [Lord God] we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.” You cannot get much more bleak than that!). He writes:

How we choose to respond to undeserved pain is a ‘kingdom moment’ a moment to reflect values that are not of this world but come only by the power and strength of God. I am reminded in this context of the rather curious admonition in the Sermon on the Mount... Jesus warns his listeners to get their life priorities straight, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?” (6.25). Now Jesus is not talking about excess or abundant possessions. He is not encouraging us to cut back and live a simple life. He is talking about *basic necessities of life* – food and clothing. Yet he says we ought not be anxious if we have nothing to eat or wear. That is pretty radical and extreme, if you ask me!

Then comes his foot note through which God gave me my eye opening moment...

Matthew 6 goes on to encourage its readers to trust in God and rest in the assurance that he knows their needs and will provide for them. The subtle radicality of the statement in 6:25, however, plants seeds that will ripen into a crop that can sustain those who are faced with decisions even more agonizing and far-reaching than those posed in Matthew 6. At its core, this statement says something like: “Isn’t there more to life than eating? Isn’t there more to the body than clothing?” I want to cry out “No! I can’t live without eating. I can’t survive without protecting clothing.” Followed to its logical end (and I would suggest intended) conclusion, this statement tells me that there are some things worth going naked and starving for.

I thought, no wonder I struggle to see God’s beauty of life in lockdown. His perspective of beauty is in a different dimension to the one I’m being fed day after day. The beauty of this apparently godforsaken world is found in the reality of suffering for the kingdom of God. I remembered, Christ went without food to draw close to his Father in heaven as the Spirit of God drove him into the wilderness to be offered sweet temptations in preparation for his earthly ministry of revealing the richness of the kingdom of God to a

troubled and hurting world (Matthew 4:1-11). I remembered, Christ went naked as he was lifted up on the cross to become the perfect and complete sacrifice for my sin (John 19:23-24). Beauty blossomed from his suffering of going without food and the indignity of being stripped naked for painful public execution.

But of course, Jesus' personal sacrifice and humiliation is just the start of salvation. He tells us that all who wish to receive the new and glorious life he offers, must follow him along the same pathway of suffering and indignity (Matthew 16:21-26). It takes the strength of the God given Holy Spirit to endure to the end, and experience the joy of seeing him face to face, and enjoying him forever (Hebrews 12:2-3). There is more. In the gospels, Jesus teaches that our suffering is the pathway to a revelation of God, not only once we get to heaven, but in our lives now as we live through painful and troubled times. There are two examples of this in John's gospel. In chapter 9 we are told of a man who endured *lifelong* suffering for the work of God to be revealed in a moment, and in a way that he never imagined (John 9:1-3). His suffering was given new significance as Jesus explained, it was the opportunity for the work of God to be displayed in his life through his healing, and thereby revealing the power and glory of Jesus. Then in chapter 11, we discover Lazarus enduring illness and even death, and his family bearing the pain of grief. This was all far from being meaningless! It was opportunity for the glory of God to be revealed through resurrection life (John 11:4).

As I entrust myself in faith to Jesus, against all the odds, against all the cynicism, against all worldly logic, God will fulfil his purposes, and the beauty of the kingdom of God will be revealed in the lives of suffering and side-lined Christians living through troubled times. Jesus calls me to patiently endure and share the good news of all he has done for us to enter the kingdom of God. And in his perfect time the glory of that kingdom will be revealed to the shock and surprise of all who consider him irrelevant, or have no time for him in their busy lives, or cynically mock.

*Wake up, Lord! Why are you asleep?
Rouse yourself. Don't reject us forever!
Why are you hiding from us?
Don't forget our suffering and trouble!*

*We fall crushed to the ground;
we lie defeated in the dust.
Come to our aid!
Because of your constant love save us!*

Psalm 44:23-26 (Good News Translation)

Philip Robertson *The Vicar*