

Returning and Remembering

Who has not been moved and disturbed by visual images and stories told of people on ventilators with vital oxygen being forced into their lungs as they fight the deadly COVID-19 virus? In the townships of South Africa people riot in their desperation to be recipients of scarce food; and in other parts of the world the pestilence of such things as malaria, locusts and war continue to ravage the lives of young and old for whom the enforcement of lockdown becomes a further threat to life.

Yet there is an irony in the truth that in these days of lockdown whilst we long for healing and the eradication of a coronavirus that leaves people gasping for air, creation itself is breathing a little more easily. There have been some minor improvements in the ozone layer and the lungs of the birds produce song more prevalent than before.

For me, praying the Lord's Prayer whilst handwashing is more than a pragmatic act but rather a heartfelt cry for God's kingdom to come on earth as in heaven.

All around us there is a sense of longing for a different future and perhaps we are more attuned to the groaning of creation as described by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Christians in Rome (Romans 8:18 – 25). There is a yearning for a future freedom when the whole of creation will be made new and the whole gamut of broken relationship will be restored - A time of shalom when there will be no more pain or dying and every tear will be wiped from our eyes and our becoming will be complete (Revelation 21:1-5).

Perhaps without even realising it, people's clapping for carers is affirmation of a longing for the Kingdom of God as the people who strive for healing, justice, peace and flourishing are applauded with enthusiasm. Whether it's healthcare workers tending the sick or vulnerable, teachers in schools, refuse workers collecting the rubbish, or those supporting victims of domestic abuse, numerous people in many different roles are working for the wellbeing of people and place amid joy and pain.

Creation is groaning but the fruits of the spirit are still evident and on a Thursday night I'm glad to make a noise for those who are expressing such things as love, joy, peace, patience and kindness.

As people of all ages have glimpsed generous acts of care amid devastation and trauma, there has been courageous talk of how this time of viral pandemic will change us and how life will never be the same again. Yet in our desire for a better future there is something seemingly paradoxical in our language of 'return'. People long to return to normal whilst also expressing a desire to occupy a different landscape. The returning is looking forward as well as back.

I found it quite profound that as we went into lockdown in Lent with a government emphasis on staying at home, the extended preface for the Eucharistic prayer in the Church of England liturgy included the wonderful words of being led by God '*into the desert of repentance, that through a pilgrimage of prayer and discipline we may grow in grace and learn to be [God's] people once again*'. It expresses the turning of repentance which enables us

to 'be' at home and there is a looking forward to a returning home to right relationship with God and neighbour and creation. In the desire to be at home there is both a looking back and a looking forwards.

Those words about learning to be God's people once again have continued to reverberate within me as I contemplate the Church living a different present as we seek to navigate our way to a future we cannot yet envisage.

I have heard people reflecting on the experience of the people of Israel wandering in the wilderness, led by Moses, as they sought to reach the Promised Land, which was an unfamiliar but desired home. Others have reflected on the theme of God's people in exile hundreds of years later, longing to return to the familiarity of home - a place where they belonged and a way of life which was familiar. Both of these periods in the life of God's people have dissonance with where we are now whilst also having resonance, not least with the themes of *returning* and *remembering*.

As I have pondered those words of *returning* and *remembering* I have found myself thinking about the wise men from the East who go in search of the Christ child as told in Matthew 2: 1-12. Somehow a star has mysteriously marked a truth that there has been the birth of someone and something significant. After their extraordinary encounter with the infant Jesus they are warned in a dream not to return to King Herod and we are told that they set out to return to their own country by a different road. These words always strike a chord in me at Epiphany at the start of the New Year - a time when people often make resolutions as they look to the future but very often find themselves returning to the familiar by the same road. I have been pondering this narrative again as I think about the road to recovery across every aspect of our lives. A recovery which is both about returning and moving forwards, and one which will require us not to forget this time we now live.

During this time of lockdown, our inability to fully come together to remember has perhaps added to our sense of bewilderment. This has included the restriction on people gathering for funerals and events such as VE day; and as Christian worshipping communities we have not been able to come together in the Eucharist as we remember and receive.

One of the key things we proclaim together in different acts of remembrance is our commitment to not forgetting so that we might live life differently, most crucially with regards to our relating as individuals, communities and nations. Remembering is not simply about the past but rather it is about how we shape the present to live the future.

At Remembrance Sunday gatherings as I hear The Last Post and stand in silence, my sadness is never all about the horrific tragedy and loss of the past but it is also about lament for the present because it is so evident that there is much we have not learnt.

I want to suggest that now in this time of reflection and planning for returning we must not lose sight of the need to keep remembering. Indeed, I would suggest that 're-remembering' is a better word to describe much of what we are currently calling 'recovery'.

During this time of lockdown many people of all ages will have experienced a sense of being emotionally dismembered, whether through isolation, disappointment, grief, or serious illness which has brought sudden separation from loved ones. Being physically distanced has

brought places of dismembering not only in communities and families but also within worshipping communities. Both the people in exile and the people wandering in the wilderness knew something of what it meant to be dislocated and dis-membered as a community longing for home - a place of familiarity, security and thriving. A place to breathe deeply and easily. There was a need for re-remembering as a people located in a place.

In the Old Testament, many years after the desert wanderings and many before exile, there comes the book of Ruth. It is a short book which begins with a journey of return born out of a situation of pain and death and the truth that life will never be the same again, and there are points of connection with our current situation.

Naomi is in a place of grief and dislocation following the death of her husband followed by the death of her two sons. She and her family had previously moved to Moab as a result of famine and now Naomi takes the decision to return to her home town of Bethlehem. Her two daughter in laws, now widows, are from Moab, and as they set out with Naomi on her journey of returning, she implores them to go back to their home. Orpah agrees but Ruth clings to her mother-in-law determined to live the unknown adventure of change which will arise from Naomi's desire to return. Ruth encapsulates this in words to Naomi: *'where you go I will go, where you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people and your God my God.'*(Ruth 1:16).

I have found myself pondering how in this present time we might have learnt to be God's people such that we elicit echoes of Ruth's words in the expressed desires of our neighbours and communities.

The book of Ruth which began with death concludes with a new shape of being at home. Indeed there is physical birth of Ruth's son, Obed, from whom Joseph the earthly father of Christ, is a descendant. And throughout the story of a returning and the birth of something new, there is a remembering and the re-remembering of a family and a people discovering relationship and community.

It seems to me that there are some simple but deep questions we need to be asking if we are to return to a different future: What is the treasure we have discovered in the present that we want to hold on to? And what has been good in the past that we have missed and want to recapture? And in the past and in the present what have we recognised as ugly, diminishing or fracturing that we want to leave behind? And most importantly, how will we remember so that we might sustain that which has been life-giving and dare to change where we need to live differently?

In our re-remembering there will always be the need for individual reflection, response and commitment, yet it will always need to be within the context of being people of community, and for followers of Christ it is about being members of the Body of Christ. One of the words which has been strong in my mind as we have sought to navigate this current landscape is that of 'solidarity'. It is one of the values and concepts I want to explore more deeply in my remembering as we live the days ahead. Solidarity is not about sameness or even agreement - it is about how we stay together and connected even in our places of difference and disagreement. It is a community word and a commitment word.

There has been something significant in the solidarity we have seen across local communities, not least in the act of clapping for carers and the appearance of rainbows, themselves a sign of remembrance. What might at first glance look like conformity is probably more akin to solidarity because behind the clapping and banging and rainbows there will be nuanced messages and different perspectives, yet something deep has been communicated in the standing together.

In the final chapter of the book of Joshua in the Old Testament, the people of Israel now in the Promised Land renew their covenant with God and one another. Joshua asks the people whom they will serve and the people are clear that they will not forsake the Lord their God (Joshua 24).

It is an act of solidarity and commitment to what is being left behind and what is being held on to as they shape their future. Joshua marks the time and place with a large stone to bear witness to all that has been spoken and to aid the people's remembering as they endeavour to live life differently. I am wondering what the stones are with which we are marking the ground as we speak a commitment to a different future and promise not to forget. I believe we need to identify touchstones for our remembering which will be life-giving for the future.

As something of an aside, perhaps there is an irony in the fact that many of our church buildings are a conspicuous 'large stone' within urban and rural landscapes, and in this time when our cathedrals and church buildings have rightly been locked there has been much comment on their place within our communities. In many places the way we return as living stones to our church buildings will be a significant contribution in helping us remember what has been good in the shaping of our lives, communities and world as well as what has been broken, unhelpful and diminishing.

One of the things I frequently ponder from family therapy training is how systems of relationship will, like a thermostat, do all they can to resist change and pull back to the familiar way of functioning with the same deep pattern of organisation, even if it might look a little different on the surface. It is the principle of homeostasis and is something we are all too familiar with in the Church.

I don't have the answers but in this time of viral pandemic I am seeking to identify where I have added to creation's groaning, whether in the present or the past, and what it is that makes my soul sing with the birds. Amid the pain and physical death of the present, where has been the birth of the new or where might it be?

I am asking how remembering will shape our returning, and what we could be doing now to mark what we wish to remember, both as individuals and as worshipping communities as we seek to participate in God's work of transformation and yearn for the coming of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven. I am pondering how as a leader I will enable and live solidarity in the returning, not losing sight of the wider world; and I am wondering how the Church is growing in grace and learning to be God's people once again.

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Questions as a framework for learning

In the uncertainty of the 'When' ...

A. What and Why

1. Leaving things behind:

- a) Looking back at the past, what do you want to leave there as you emerge into the next season?
- b) Why?
- c) What do you want to leave behind from this present time as you emerge into the next season?
- d) Why?

2. Taking things with you:

- e) Looking back at the past what do you want to recover in the next season?
- f) Why?
- g) What do you want to take with you from this present time as you emerge into the next season?
- h) Why?

B. How are you going to do the above?