

First Self-Isolating Sunday

AKA Mothering Sunday

This Sunday – henceforth termed the Great Shakeout – is the first when many congregations across the nation are being encouraged to be salt & light mingled with their neighbours & communities rather than remaining in a meaningful but isolated huddle (it sounds much better than saying closed down)! As a believer who is firmly convinced that God is always at work & that every difficult situation is a Godly opportunity for His glory to be revealed (directly & through us His children) how can we make best use of this time?

As I was scheduled to take the service at Cherry Willingham Methodist Church (CWMC) this Sunday I promised that in lieu of being gathered together I would put together some thoughts for sharing. Below I have created material for 7 days – running through from Sunday to next Saturday to allow daily space for reflection & reaction. Of course you can binge read all at one go, but with this extra daily time, why not take things more steadily & allow space for God to get involved?

Sunday

Mother's Day (Mothering Sunday) – what's that all about?

Well depending on who you listen to there are various answers, but here goes.

Firstly "Mother's Day" is a commercial hijacking which has more to do with flower & card sellers than anything else (through Anna Jarvis in the US in 1908 & a service at a Methodist Church) – however, if it gets the general population to stop & think & give thanks those who have loved, nurtured & cared for us that is no bad thing.

So let's go in reverse by around 400 years; hold tight. In these Isles in particular, the 4th Sunday in Lent was set aside as a mini-celebration (all Lent Sundays are breathing & celebration points in the journey from Ash Wednesday to Easter Sunday); but this Sunday is special as it is roughly half-way. Two particular activities took place in keeping with this festival; firstly workers (in domestic service etc) were given the day off to go & spend time with family – often the only day in the year when everyone got together; secondly this visit incorporated the families going to their "mother" church – which could be where they had been baptised, where the family worshipped or the nearest Cathedral (mother Church of the Diocese) – in our case Lincoln Cathedral or way before that (11thc) Stow Minster



Think piece

This brings me to some observations we might care to reflect upon:

The original intention brought with it a:

- Focus on family & loved ones;
- Community gathering, being together & sharing joy (however briefly before the big house or other demands called people back to toil);
- Centrality of worship & thanksgiving to God.

How do we maintain these values & aims (which are timeless & universal) now & what more could be done?

In the midst of busyness (consider the workers getting their one day a year free & together – we have it easy by comparison) how do we carve out time for the really important – & what does the “really important” mean to you.

Who should I give thanks for – or say thank you to – today?

Who can I support, help or bring a smile to in these unusual times?

What should I give thanks specifically to God for & how best in my own way can I show in my worship my honour to God for who He is (hallowed be thy name)

I'm not writing a prayer every day – particularly where the think piece leads you to prayers of your own – but will throw one or two in over the course of the week.

Tomorrow I will be reflecting on COVID19 & how new patterns of life may become valued rather than resented.

Monday

The American Inventor Thomas Edison is attributed with saying “Genius is 1% inspiration & 99% perspiration”. With COVID19 we could be forgiven if we thought life was made up in similar proportions of frantic change & routine drudgery – in fact if memory serves me correctly, a similar description was used by men occupying the trenches in WWI !

Times & decisions are currently moving at a rate we cannot absorb easily; yet those same decisions are ironically causing us not just to react very fast but also put so much on hold – important meetings gone; diaries cleared, long awaited theatre visits or holidays removed, family duties (like the kids not at school or the self-isolated needing more support) break through. & people find change difficult generally. Whoever screamed “stop the world I want to get off” has got their wish!

So what do we make of it & how do we react? How do you honestly feel about things at present?

Bring that to God.

Think piece

Just a few thoughts from a Christian perspective, these are foundational truths but it is important to remind ourselves as we forget so easily;

- In a time of massive change & upheaval, God is the only constant & is wholly trustworthy Hebrews 13:5-8;
Rend Collective True North <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uwh27nFnVIU>
- The storms may rage but God is still in control & wholly reliable; He still calms the wind & waves (physically & in our lives) Mark 4: 35 – 5: 20;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j4taAN4Qtbl>
- Our safety, security & wellbeing don't depend on lifestyle, work, human connections or self-sufficiency but to Him alone Psalm 16 & 23;
- This may have taken everyone by surprise but not Him! Like all things He can make use of it within His plans & purposes;
- Those who don't know Him need to see we are different (like John & Charles Wesley saw the Moravians when the storms raged & threatened to sink their vessel, The Simmonds on their journey to America) & we need to share the reason for that difference

<https://www.methodist.org.uk/about-us/the-methodist-church/history/a-storm-at-sea/>

Spend time – meditating upon & praying into one or more of the Scriptures suggested or one that is speaking to you at the present time.

Why not share those verses or your thoughts with me or with others for our mutual encouragement? & share any hymns that come to mind – there are many that speak on these subjects both modern & traditional. I have deliberately chosen some you may be less familiar with – give them a view.

Tuesday

Continuing our thoughts on COVID19 I have been very aware that the themes of self-isolation, social distancing, restrictions on travel or venturing out, limitations on choices of food & many more things run parallel in some senses to this spiritual season of Lent (only it might extend beyond 40 days)!

We read in the gospels, that after His baptism, Jesus was led (driven) into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit before His public ministry started. This is covered in all 3 of the Synoptic gospels Matthew 4, Mark 1, Luke 4. This was a time of testing, strengthening, confirming & preparing for Jesus & He came out moving in power & speaking with authority.

I suggest you read the passages & consider how that time may have felt for Jesus – the few brief verses cover almost 6 weeks & in its usual understated manner we are told Jesus was weary & hungry at the end – can we even begin to contemplate what that was like & how attractive the temptation to take the proffered easy (but futile) route must have been?

Think piece

In his book *Awakening Cry*, Peter Greig (founder of the 24-7 prayer movement) looks at the following verse

Isaiah 40: 3 A voice of one calling: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord..."

He pointed out that he had always read the verse incorrectly as A voice of one calling in the wilderness "prepare the way for the Lord..."

As I thought about it I realised I had done the same! This passage is not someone out in the wilderness shouting, it is saying the wilderness is the place of encounter. Away from the disturbances, the clamour, the disturbances & the demands of others or on our time as we are set aside we will meet with the Lord. There are many instances in the Old Testament including Moses & the Burning Bush, Jacob's vision & his place of wrestling with God, the 40 years between Egypt & the Promised Land etc which mirror this encounter as does Jesus venturing away from his followers to pray & seek the Father throughout the gospels.

Our current opportunity with its' cleared diaries etc allows space for us to more diligently & determinedly seek the face of God.

How can you best make use of this possibility? Remember that we have seen what Isaiah 40 begins with – but if you read on it finishes with very familiar verses:

²⁸ Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, & his understanding no one can fathom. ²⁹ He gives strength to the weary & increases the power of the weak. ³⁰ Even youths grow tired & weary, & young men stumble & fall; ³¹ but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run & not grow weary, they will walk & not be faint.

Isn't that an encouragement for these times if ever we needed one?

Give thanks & seek Him in the desert times & the quiet spaces afforded to you at this time.

Wednesday

Sticking with the COVID19 theme for another day (I hadn't quite planned it this way but it seems to be where we are flowing!) If you are on Social Media you may in the last few days have come across the following reflection:

IN THE TIME OF PANDEMIC

And the people stayed home. & they read books, & listened, & rested, & exercised, & made art, & played games, & learned new ways of being, & were still. & they listened more deeply. Some meditated, some prayed, some danced. Some met their shadows. & the people began to think differently.

And the people healed. And, in the absence of people living in ignorant, dangerous, mindless, & heartless ways, the earth began to heal.

And when the danger passed, & the people joined together again, they grieved their losses, & made new choices, & dreamed new images, & created new ways to live, & they healed the earth fully, as they had been healed.

Kitty O'Meara

I love the way it is written but was in 2 minds about sharing it for reasons I explain; I do believe – with certain caveats – that there are deep truths to be unearthed from it & we need to be able to converse around the common ground we see.

Firstly the issues:

- I never take anything on the internet at face value – & neither should you, test all things against Scripture stands not just for prophecy but should be applied to content from the ether! I have checked out the provenance as far as possible & the verse originates from someone who describes themselves as a “spiritual healer & counsellor” & would probably be classified within the New Age spectrum;
- The verse refers obliquely (one of the websites I checked was much more overt) about gaia (I have left it lower case deliberately as it is a spirit or god with a small g!) – also known sometimes as the earth mother or earth goddess – Scriptures state that there is only one true God & He has revealed himself through Jesus His son;
- The verse suggests a symbiotic relationship between the earth & humanity – whereas Scriptures state there is a stewardship relationship with humanity given responsibility (which we discharge poorly most of the time);
- There is a presumption that humanity will all become good & “play nicely” (second stanza) but both history & Scripture say otherwise! The human condition is sinful & rebellious; no matter how hard we scrub the depths of our own heart we cannot clean away the stains or impact; only the blood of Jesus can achieve that;
- The idea of the world being healed – by our actions – is not achievable (however, improvement can be made – see photos below), but when Jesus returns there will be a new Earth & a new Heaven & that is our hope & confidence

I could add more but will leave it there – so why share it if all that is in dispute?

Well, apart from to make you think, it is because a call to live radically different lives starts with us not others. The Revivalist Gypsy Smith was once asked how to get revival started & said kneel down & draw a circle around yourself, then pray “Lord send revival & begin it right here in this circle”! As the first stanza of the verse says, we need to do different to be different – we know that prayer, meditation, listening & intentional availability all need to happen in the context of the work of the Spirit, the saving & redeeming work of Jesus & the eternal love of the Creator God who is Our Father. Everything follows from that centring on Him.

2 Chronicles 7:14 puts it very well: **if my people**, which are called by **my** name, shall humble themselves, & pray, & seek **my** face, & turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, & will forgive their sin, & will heal their land.

I leave you with a quote from the Westminster Shorter Catechism today:

Q. What is the chief end of man?

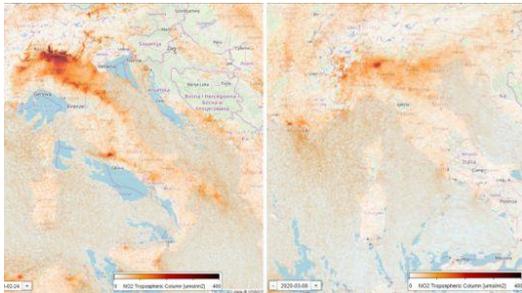
A. Man's chief end is to glorify God, & to enjoy him forever.

What changes do you need to consider? Write them down if it will help you remember & act upon them.

The promised photos are overleaf!



Venice this week – the waters are clear & fish are visible – this is more likely due to the settlement of sediment rather than the removal of pollution but such a significant change in a short period



Air pollution in the form of Nitrogen Dioxide (NO₂) reductions in northern Italy due to lockdown (two pictures taken less than 2 weeks apart)

Thursday

Enough of COVID19 for now! As part of the Mothering Sunday service (had you forgotten already?) I intended to share some “pen pictures” called “Mothers & Others” to see what we can learn from individuals we meet in the pages of Scripture. There is an almost inexhaustible supply & each is of fascination. But I will be bringing you just one snippet from each of “The three Marys” & here is the first! With almost immaculate timing (pun intended) Wednesday was the Feast of the Annunciation, so:

Mary – mother of Jesus

Everything was about to change:

She looked around the familiar rooms

The only house she had ever known all her life.

*Her parents had shown her love, taught her about G*d & His love & care & oh yes chores! the need for hard work & commitment.*

*It was all going to change – she was betrothed, to an older man, an artisan, a craftsman. She had known him most of her life, recalling visits to the workshop when parents wanted something for the house or for work. He was able to see what the wood could become even before he began fashioning things both beautiful & practical. A reliable, practical, dogged, G*d fearing man – no task unfinished.*

*One day, soon, she would leave the familiar surroundings & step into her destiny; one day those strong & secure hands would hold her; at first she was uncertain, but obedience & acceptance prevailed & she now faced the task before her with a mixture of excitement & trepidation, confident G*d would lead her.*

She stood; time to continue with her allotted chores.

The room was filled with light....everything was about to change.

We can all identify with Mary at the moment, all the plans & certainties swept away in an instant, facing an unknown & unexpected future; head filled with questions, mostly unanswerable. How can we learn from her response? See Luke 1: 26-38 for the full account & also her fuller declaration to Elizabeth (often known as The Magnificat) further on in the same chapter Luke 1: 46-55 – to my mind one of the most incredible Spirit inspired declarations to be found in the pages of Scripture. This is worthy of reflection & meditation – ponder it in your heart.

Consider the certainty, the security, the promises & the goodness of God & the fact He knows our tomorrows already; give Him your praises today.

Friday

Mary of Bethany

When we moved to Nettleham 27 years ago & were waiting for our house to be built, there was a bit of a dispute about allocating a house number. The houses either side were already built & were numbered 12 & 14, neither the developer nor Royal Mail were comfortable with us being 13, even though we were fine about it! We were told to give the house a name & chose Bethany, as Bethany was where Jesus loved to abide, a place of fellowship which was open to God & His love. Eventually the “powers that be” relented & we were given the number 13 – it may be the only 13 on the whole Poplar Farm development (it certainly was at that point) but the plaque was outside the door “Bethany” as we wanted it to be a place where Jesus would hang out & allow us to share his life.

Ask yourself – how do we make our space (home and life) more welcoming for Jesus and those he loves? How do we avoid grieving or quenching the Comforter and hear his promptings more easily. Are there any steps you could take to help achieve this?

Bethany was close to Jerusalem, but far enough away for Jesus & His disciples to withdraw from the crowds & the clamour. Less than 2 miles between the 2 places is about the same distance as from our current house on the top edge of Cherry near the village hall to the start of the properties in Nettleham on Lodge Lane. We can reflect on how a withdrawal from bustle and activity (as is being demanded from many at present) can help us be restored, equipped and prepared for the fray. Make the most of this time!

During his earthly life, the only time Scriptures declare Jesus’ love for any family is in John 11:5 “Jesus loved Martha, & her sister, & Lazarus”. They in turn all loved him and this was displayed by each of them in different ways.

The passage we are often pointed to is Luke 10: 38-42 with the busy Martha and the attentive Mary. Much has been said, but for now I just want to ask how easy do we find it to simply sit in the presence of our Lord or is it an area we find difficult? I recently was challenged by the statement – how did Mary become a devoted worshipper, it can’t happen by accident, it takes time and investment of one’s self (falling more deeply in love helps too)! Is there anything you can intentionally choose to do in order to deepen your spiritual life and worship?

Saturday

Both society and the church have come up with plenty of ideas and views about the previous two Marys but these are overshadowed by the level of mis-conjecture surrounding our third Mary – from bestselling novels to films and musicals to spurious ancient texts Mary Magdalene has had them all. So I'm going to feature on just two events – our first encounter with Mary in the pages of Scripture and the first encounter post-resurrection with the risen Christ.

We meet Mary; by the way Magdalene was not a surname but a reference to where she was from (Magdala), a city on the shore of Lake Galilee about 3 miles from Tiberias whose chief industry was fishing & fish curing & processing; in Luke 8:1-3.

Mary had been set free from severe bondage, one of the purposes of Jesus' ministry declared in Luke 4: 18-19. Her gratitude was such that she appears to have left everything & followed him, providing support from her own means.

This lowly, unclean, outcast was known by name to the Father and through the gospels to us, she never stopped being grateful, neither should we. Pause to give thanks for all that God has done in your life – from initial call to this very day. We all have a story of the goodness of God and it continues on.

There are around a dozen specific references in the gospels, plus other passages where some commentators have suggested the unnamed person in question was her but what we can be sure of is John 20 there she is. In the tomb garden, where she had seen his body laid, after she had followed him from her vigil at the cross. Such dedication, such love, such faithfulness. She seeks and looks through tears and eventually he is there, he speaks her name and her world is transformed in a moment. I almost weep with joy for her when I read this, I almost weep with the knowledge that when we reach out and call for Jesus, when he is the desire of our hearts he meets with us.

Many of us currently feel we are in a garden of fear, death, uncertainty, separation. Consider how you feel at the moment; remember there is nothing bigger than God and nothing beyond Him. Reach out to the one who made you, who brings salvation and peace and who calls your name and bids you come.

I hope you have found this week's reflections useful – although produced specifically for CWMC and with a Sunday theme of Mothering Sunday they are all written to be generic and timely so please pass them on to others electronically and for anyone who uses them, please let me have any feedback (kind and constructive please) and may you be blessed.

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