

Reflection for the Fifth Sunday after Trinity (12.07.20) Revd Steph Nadarajah

On Thursday, I went back into church for the first time in nearly four months. A small group of us gathered in readiness to assess capacity and layout but - before we did - we paused to pray. Acknowledging the momentousness of something that most of us took for granted before all of this happened, we began by praying for all members of our community, particularly those who find these times difficult, and keeping a bond of silence. And we prayed, too, for the future we face together. A couple of our number shed a tear while we placed chairs two metres apart. I didn't cry until a few hours later, when it really hit me - seeing the church like that and thinking through the implications of it all. It's the weight of responsibility as we seek to survey the landscape and try to make the best decisions we can together about how to move forward.

And all of this was very much in keeping with the theme of my week - a good deal of which was spent reflecting with clergy colleagues in neighbouring parishes on the things we've learned during lockdown, and listening to stories of how different people in different churches have responded to the same restrictions. I noticed that no-one mentioned their Mission Action Plan. But you know that sower Jesus mentions in his parable - the reckless one who goes around flinging seed far and wide, hoping for the best? Well, I was reminded of that.

A lot of it has been scattergun. As one fellow vicar put it, 'a crisis makes you do things you thought you had to plan', especially pastoral care. But, lo and behold, it didn't actually take that much to get people connected and looking out for each other in a more systematic way. Colleagues spoke about finding life in the unexpected: corporate prayer, particularly in the morning and evening, has been especially well-received by congregations. But we also shared some of the things we've missed and that we long for: those incidental encounters with people that happen in and around a church all the time; the real, physical presence of congregations worshipping alongside each other; the two-way interaction you get in worship that can't possibly be replicated online; the everyday interruptions that provide grist to the mill of our spiritual lives.

This process of taking stock is an incredibly important one. In recent weeks, we've been thinking about and reflecting on a paper that was published by the United Reformed Church: a paper which aims to help churches make a plan to carry them past lockdown and into a healthy future (*Ready for the new 'normal': A discussion paper for a pandemic recovery and resumption plan*, © United Reformed Church, 2020, www.urc.org.uk). It says this:

'We would be most unwise to look to get back to 'how we always do things.' This is, we pray, a once-in-a-lifetime chance to do things better. ... There are some things that we should be glad that we don't have to start again - things that 'we've always done this way' when nobody really remembers or understands

why..... If you rush back to the 'old ways' you could miss the opportunity to find a new way of doing things.'

Not everything we've done will bear fruit in due course. Not everyone will have made the transition with us to a different way of being church. While we know that lots of people have started accessing church during lockdown, we also know that there'll be others who feel that the loss of church hasn't made a huge dent in their lives. Back to the parable of the sower, then, and the different ways in which people might have responded to God, faith or church during this time of pandemic.

But our readings today remind of us of several important truths. **The first is that everyone is starting from a different place.** The seed falls in a variety of terrains and the confession we shared at the start of this service expresses this so profoundly. We all have different opportunities, different beginnings and endings in support and nurture, in circumstances and levels of struggle. We do not experience things in the same way. Added to that is the phenomenon of the so-called 'Coronacoaster': the rollercoaster of emotions that this pandemic has wrought in us. Every single person has their own story to tell about the effects of Covid-19 on them and on their loved ones.

Which brings us to the second important truth: we need to listen. And then we need to listen. And then we need to listen again. And once we've listened, we need to be generous and kind. We have been living - all of us - in a climate of relative fear for the past four months and this has taken a significant emotional toll, whether we're aware of it or not. Just yesterday, the Bishop of London, Bishop Sarah Mullally, wrote: 'The challenge to us as churches is to continue to have a culture in which everyone feels safe to share their struggles and feels able to speak openly.' In all of the emotional upheaval, that is going to feel especially hard, particularly when others have not had the same experiences we've had. They may have a different view of what the future looks like. They may want to move at a faster or slower pace than us. But let anyone with ears, listen.

The third important truth is that God is faithful. Our first reading from Isaiah is, hands down, one of my favourite passages of scripture, and I can - and do - recite it frequently by heart. It speaks of the utter relentlessness of God in creating the conditions for life and growth. It speaks of God, rooting up the thorns and briars from our midst and putting bread on the table for us to eat. God will accomplish that which God purposes. Seeds take a while to grow and we may not, yet, be able to see the ways in which things we've said or done may have been part of God's plan. But we are invited to accept that God knows who we are - that God chooses us with all our limitations - and that God blesses our scattergun efforts, because they're a pretty good reflection of God's general approach to things.

At the beginning of lockdown, I - like many - naively imagined that, one day in the not-too-distant future, the doors would simply be flung open again, and that we'd all pile back in for a service of celebration. I have gradually accepted that our return won't be the triumphant and inclusive moment we had hoped it would be - the

mountains and the hills certainly can't sing, just yet. And yet God was very much in the midst of our tears, heartache and longing, as we stood together in church on Thursday. Here is the prayer we prayed together last week, as we looked forward to an uncertain future - but one in which God promises to lead us back in peace.

Gracious God,
persevering through the years, persevering to the end,
as we face the future as a community of your people in this place,
may we know afresh your faithful love,
and see afresh your loving faithfulness.
May it be your words of life for which we listen,
and by which alone we live.
God before and God behind,
for all that has been - thanks.
For all that will be - Yes!

Amen.