**The Parishes of Crail and St Ayle**

**Reflections for the Locked out - Locked Down Church from Peter Neilson**

**Sunday 14 June 2020**

Good morning and *shalom* to all my friends in Crail and St Ayle.

**Grace and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.**

Another week of lockdown. And for those under the greater restriction of shielding, the prospect of an extra six weeks of total isolation. It does become a bit tedious – unless you are one of those very practical people who can always find something to paint or make or mend. Some people can turn their hands to anything. Some are restless. Some are anxious. Some are quietly content.

Dorothy and I have been fairly content apart from the recurring ache to see family beyond phone and video calls, but I confess that this week has felt a bit flat. A touch of groundhog day. As one character in “W1A”, the satire on the BBC, put it, “We are on peak repeat!”

In contrast to that sameness, we have witnessed a convulsive mass movement against COVID 1619 (the date of the first black slave arriving in America), and debates over the place of statues celebrating slave traders, challenging the unjust foundations of much of the inherited wealth of our own nation. A tsunami of submerged emotion has burst on us out of a deceptively calm sea.

For myself I have been prompted to ask forgiveness for what the Psalmist calls “our hidden faults” – personal and communal - that I have not recognised before, and to resolve to refrain from “wilful sins” of any overt or covert words, attitudes or actions that might poison the well of community life.(Psalm 19:11,12) It seems only right to begin today with prayers of confession.

And so to worship. Settle and be still. Take your time. Let the Spirit lead you on unknown paths of praise and thanksgiving, of confession and forgiveness, of Divine encounter and prayers that beat in time with the heart of God.

**Gathering in to the Presence of God**

From the tradition of the Eastern Orthodox church comes “The Jesus Prayer” – to be prayed on the rhythm of the breath and repeated until it soaks into our being. It is a prayer of confession, appropriate for these times of international reflection and repentance. Let it take you were the Spirit leads in personal and corporate confession.

*(Breathing out)* Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God

*(Breathing in)* Have mercy on me, a sinner.

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*Set a guard over my mouth, O Lord*

*Keep watch over the door of my lips. (Psalm 141:3)*

From the racist insults on city streets and sports grounds

To the cutting words on the green benches of parliament,

Lord, forgive our destructive language.

From the salacious headlines of the press

To the slanderous tweets on our phones

Lord, forgive our poisonous words,

From the intentional deceptions of world leaders

To the emotional abuse of domestic partners

Lord, forgive our dangerous tongues.

Stand guard on my mouth, Lord

like a sentry at the gate

halting any word that would hurt

and letting pass only those words that will heal.

Keep watch at my lips, Lord

As the lookout in the dark,

spotting the self-justifying deceptions

and releasing the truth that sets us free.

Cleanse my heart of pride and prejudice, Lord

Heal my heart of hidden hurts that hurt others

So that my conversation this day

May be full of grace and truth.

Fill my heart with love for Jesus

Till there is no space for hate or hurt

And words flow with gentle wisdom

Or offer the gracious space of silence.

AMEN

**Listening for the Word of God**

**Today’s Gospel Reading: Matthew 9:35-10:10 (The Message)**

**35-38**Then Jesus made a circuit of all the towns and villages. He taught in their meeting places, reported kingdom news, and healed their diseased bodies, healed their bruised and hurt lives. When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd. “What a huge harvest!” he said to his disciples. “How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!”

**10 1-4**The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them into the ripe fields. He gave them power to kick out the evil spirits and to tenderly care for the bruised and hurt lives. This is the list of the twelve he sent:

Simon (they called him Peter, or “Rock”),
Andrew, his brother,
James, Zebedee’s son,
John, his brother,
Philip,
Bartholomew,
Thomas,
Matthew, the tax man,
James, son of Alphaeus,
Thaddaeus,
Simon, the Canaanite,
Judas Iscariot (who later turned on him).

**5-8**Jesus sent his twelve harvest hands out with this charge:

“Don’t begin by travelling to some far-off place to convert unbelievers. And don’t try to be dramatic by tackling some public enemy. Go to the lost, confused people right here in the neighbourhood. Tell them that the kingdom is here. Bring health to the sick. Raise the dead. Touch the untouchables. Kick out the demons. You have been treated generously, so live generously.

**9-10**“Don’t think you have to put on a fund-raising campaign before you start. You don’t need a lot of equipment. *You* are the equipment, and all you need to keep that going is three meals a day.

Travel light.

**Reflecting on God’s Word for us**

Somebody asked me this week how I thought church might be different after lockdown. I struggled to answer. Her own observation was that we will be weaned from our buildings and learn to be God’s people with a new flexibility - a literal version of “church without walls”.

Certainly many people have discovered the wide range of worship opportunities available, either in broadcasts or online. Many churches have used ZOOM to communicate on screen for worship, prayer, shared study times or a virtual coffee and chat. Perhaps some of us will prefer to continue in the comfort of our sofas rather than return to the hard straight backs of our pews.

Personally, I suspect the lockdown may be just long enough to break old patterns, but not long enough to establish new ones. However, that is where churches will have to make some deliberate choices: do we default back to old ways, or do we choose intentionally to develop new patterns of worship, fellowship and service for a new generation? This is a unique opportunity to choose life.

For the congregations of Crail and St Ayle we have the privilege of anticipating a fresh start in July with our new minister, John Murray. The break in our established patterns will offer him a clean sheet on which to paint his own picture of how we might be the church beyond 2020.

Of course, it is not the role of the minister to create a congregation in his own image; nor the role of a congregation to form the minister into their image. Rather our calling together is be open to being formed more fully into the image of Christ, renewed by God’s word and God’s Spirit. I encourage us all to pray for John and his wife Neilian over this month as they prepare to move from Skye to join us. There are very particular challenges in starting a new ministry under current conditions.

The Church without Walls report used a very simple description of church, taken from the Gospels: “people with Jesus at the centre, travelling where Jesus takes us.” I suggest that this week, we take our cue from this scenario in Matthew’s Gospel. As we walk around our communities, pray with eyes open to see as Jesus sees. That will offer clues as to what we are called to be and do.

***He saw the problems beneath the surface.***

*When he looked out over the crowds, his heart broke. So confused and aimless they were, like sheep with no shepherd.*

These past weeks of protest have exposed years of repressed hurt and rage in the black community. What lies hidden behind the faces of those we see in the street? What anxieties about the future? What family tensions? What angers have frozen into depression? What long shadow of grief? What dreams have been shattered? What struggles to make ends meet? What secret addictions?

*His heart broke.* Are we ready for His compassion? Will we be a therapeutic community of healing and hope for the hurting? Or will we play safe and keep our distance?

***He saw the potential beyond the scarcity***

*“What a huge harvest!” he said to his disciples. “How few workers! On your knees and pray for harvest hands!”* Jesus sees beyond the problems to new possibilities - “a huge harvest”.

Problems of church survival cloud our vision of Kingdom possibilities. What would it mean to see God’s Kingdom growing here? Who are the silent searchers after God? What false foundations have been exposed in this pandemic? Who have been awakened to a desire for something more? What dormant dreams of a better world are waiting to encouraged? Who is the next disciple whose name will be added to Jesus’ list? Who are the new “harvest hands” waiting to be called into God’s service? What will it mean to “travel light”?

I don’t have answers to my friend’s question about the future shape of the church. Better to live with these questions, and pray with eyes – and hearts – open to what Jesus is seeing and saying.

*The prayer was no sooner prayed than it was answered. Jesus called twelve of his followers and sent them out into the harvest.*

Beware! Prayers **are** answered. The answer might begin with us!

**Responding to God’s Word and God’s Spirit**

God of the nations, who weeps over your divided family,

We pray for all who live under the curse of discrimination,

Being put down or excluded from their place of potential.

Cleanse our nation of our blind spots and our guilty silence

Until all stand together, equal and free to serve one another.

God of all nations, who hears the cries of the poor,

We pray for those who are dying in Brazil and Peru,

Deprived of care because of ruthless leadership.

Break the powers that hold them down

And release your healing power through prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, who welcomes children warmly,

We pray for our children deprived of schooling,

Meeting with friends and learning new skills.

Grant wisdom and creative planning

So that schools may be opened safely in due course.

Lord Jesus Christ, who comforts those who mourn,

We pray for all who have lost loved ones in recent times

And live in the unfamiliar world of grief.

Stand alongside them with your nail-pierced hands

Wounded Healer and Ground of Hope.

Holy Spirit, who leads us into all truth,

We pray for those who must govern in these days,

Sifting through competing visions, values and voices.

May they be given clarity to see the truth of what is;

And the courage to face the truth of what must be done.

Holy Spirit, who glorifies the Father and the Son,

We pray for a spiritual awakening in our times,

Raising up a new generation of disciples.

May you bless and guide John Murray, our new minister,

As he comes to lead us all deeper into your presence,

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

We offer these prayers

in communion with all God’s people

Of all nations and all cultures,

On earth, and in the great company of heaven. AMEN

**A Meditation Before we Go**

***The Weight of a Snowflake***

“Tell me the weight of a snowflake” a coalmouse (coaltit) asked a wild dove. “Nothing more than nothing” was the answer. “In that case, I must tell you a marvellous story,” the coalmouse said.

“I sat on the branch of a fir, close to its trunk, when it began to snow – not heavily, not a raging blizzard: no just like a dream, without a sound and without any violence. Since I did not have anything better to do, I counted the snowflakes settling on the twigs and needles of my branch. Their number was exactly 3,741,942. When the 3,741,943rd flake dropped on the branch – nothing more than nothing, as you say – the branch broke off.”

Having said that, the coalmouse flew away. The dove, since Noah’s time an authority on the matter, thought about the story for a while, and finally said to herself: “Perhaps there is only one person’s voice lacking for peace to come to the world.”

*[Kurt Kauter, quoted in “The Small Owl Calling – Reflections for uncertain times” compiled by Peter Milllar, 2019]*

**A Blessing**

*Stretch out your hands towards our invisible congregation and community.*

*Imagine we are saying the grace together and to each other,*

 *so we are receiving the blessing as well as giving it.*

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

 the love of God

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all,

evermore. AMEN