

A Reflection from Michael Harris, Methodist Local Preacher for Sunday 8th August ~ Trinity 10

Seventy years ago next year I began my journey as a Methodist local preacher by leading worship at two of our churches that have survived the changes and chances of the decades – Meriden and Balsall Common. And as I reach the latest stage in that journey, I have come to the conclusion that I am no longer being called to preach sermons, but to share with my friends in the churches I visit reflections on the memories, experiences, challenges and opportunities stirred by my faith such as it is. You must forgive me for that is what I am doing today among you, the friends I have made and valued for so long here at Fillongley.

During the most severe and strict days of lockdown over the past months, I have been very grateful to those neighbours and friends who would knock on my door and ask me if they could bring me anything from the local shops. I used to write short lists of the groceries I needed and within a short time small bags would appear in my porch, with the note “Pay me later.” I used to ask for a variety of groceries, but every list contained one specific item – a loaf of bread. More than any other food I needed bread. And isn't that true of most of us, and many folk tried their hand at their own bread-making during these last months.

Bread is the “staff of life” and has always been regarded as such throughout human history, and today the key verse in our Gospel reading is “I am the bread of life,” the great claim made by Jesus. What bread is for our bodies, Jesus claimed to be for our hungry hearts, satisfying our deepest needs. Throughout the Bible we see bread featuring in many events and sayings: The Law given to Moses is like bread, milk, wine and honey; the Manna provided by God for the People of Israel in the Wilderness; the feeding of the 5,000; the Last Supper – and so on.

As I thought about the importance of bread and our need for it as physical food and developed this, as Jesus did as food for our hearts, minds and spirits, I found myself moving on to think about the many other ways in which I have been fed, sustained, strengthened and blessed during the Pandemic, with all its consequences for my life and restrictions on my activities. And if I have derived such food, sustenance, strength and blessing I realised that many others would have their stories to tell of similar things.

I have been thinking of three things in particular that have sustained me and given me much joy, and I invite you to compile your own list and give thanks for the items on it. **THE JOY OF THE OPEN AIR.** Right from the start of the pandemic and still today we are all being advised to spend time outside and so vast numbers of people have found new enthusiasm and fresh rewards in their gardens, in parks and open spaces, and in the sheer pleasure of walking. We have discovered the beauty of trees and flowers, we have experienced the sights and sounds of nature, we have heard more birdsong than we ever dreamed existed, and to our surprise we even found ourselves getting fitter. So let us give thanks for the Open Air and recognise that in it we have encountered the wonders of God's creation.

THE JOY OF BOOKS AND MUSIC. Of course, over the many months of restrictions to our lives there have been occasions when we have not been able to spend time

out of doors, and have been turned inwards to rely on our own resources. During these times I have been sustained and stimulated both mentally and spiritually by reading and listening; reading books and listening to music. I have read books on my own subject History, books that have developed and deepened my knowledge of the Bible, I have re-read old favourites and new ones recently published, books on cricket, humorous books and many others. And I have replayed many of my CDs, DVDs, even old LPs, and added to these my musical experiences through YouTube, Spotify and other media.

You may have found other ways of both surviving and enjoying your lives during these months, but in every case let us give thanks to God for giving us so many ways of receiving the blessings that have brought us through.

THE JOY OF OTHER PEOPLE. Some of you may know that in the six weeks before the first lockdown I had to face the deaths of my wife Ruth and my brother Rob, and so was deprived of the two people who had known me best and with whom I had shared the most over the years. I will however be eternally grateful for the fact that we were able to give them both wonderful funerals and thanksgiving services, the memory of which will live with me always. But since then I have come to know more deeply and more gratefully the kindness of others – not just my wonderful family and some church friends, but what I have learned to call “the kindness of strangers.”

I think of Caroline, a lady who years before had been one of my wife’s pupils. She had lived in the U.S.A., married an American and had a daughter. In March 2020 they found themselves in Earlsdon where they were staying with her Father, and because of lockdown, couldn’t return home for many months. Every week she called at my door and collected my list of greengroceries and within an hour had delivered them back to me. I think of Ben and Samantha, who live next door and checked on me every two or three days and cheered me with doorstep chats and encouragement. And especially I think of Alice and Felix. I was going for one of my daily walks one day when, about 100 yards from my house I took a tumble and fell spreadeagled on the pavement. As I lay there tentatively checking for any injuries, I heard a voice and saw a young woman with her toddler in his pushchair over the road. I assured her that I thought I was alright but she insisted on walking alongside me back to my home. An hour later I heard a sound in the porch and when I went to see what was happening, I found a bag of fruit, sweets, chocolate and sticking plaster with a note saying, “we hope these will cheer you up and that you are O.K., from Alice and Felix.” A few days later they called on me again, and since then over the past fifteen months have kept regularly in touch and I have got to know them well and been able to give small present to Felix who is now three and a half. These people have all shown me great kindness, the kindness of strangers.

Let us all rejoice and give thanks to God for other people.

Jesus was the bread of life: he also spoke of being living water; he was the Good Shepherd, and called himself the Way, the Truth and the Life. Many people in many lands throughout the centuries and in our own day have seen Him in their own ways as I have done, in the open air, in nature, books we read, the music we listen to, but above all in the people we meet. Let us praise God and rejoice.

Amen