

Twelfth night. January 2021

Dear Friends

We are entering a third lockdown very like the lockdown in March with a 'stay at home message.' As Gordon reminded us last week we shall emerge from this crisis with the aid of the new vaccines and I imagine we shall all feel like survivors. We shall know a little more of what is required to flourish even when we face such an adverse situation. This is an opportunity to show our solidarity and appreciation of all who serve in the NHS and on the frontline in other ways by staying at home as the wonderful window at New North Road, with its rainbow and message of hope affirms.

At the moment there will be complex individual choices that we all need to make each day. We may need a good friend to talk these over with, but the overall direction is clear. Things are improving but the new more contagious strain of the coronavirus means we need to take extra, extra care at the moment. Many of us will have sighed when we heard the news. For people in education this may have been a very long sigh, especially where it requires people to use their 'beta' skills to adapt and improvise, something I know for myself.

All this means that we shall have to suspend our plans to reopen the church for public worship in January and early February although we can still meet via zoom. I hope that we can continue to give thanks for the new vaccinees and the speed with which these are becoming available and find as many ways of encouraging each-other as we can, 'walking together and watching over one another' in the days before us.

As I think about the New Year with all its hopes and opportunities I am reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a German pastor who was in goal because of his opposition to the Nazi regime as New Year dawned in 1945. By then the ultimate victory wasn't in doubt but the difficulties of the present were all too real. He wrote a wonderful prayer for that New Year which asserts the sovereignty of God in a situation and calls us to respond with mature Faith in which we trust more and stress less.

By gracious powers so wonderfully sheltered,
and confidently waiting come what may,
we know that God is with us night and morning
and never fails to greet us each new day.

Yet is this heart by its old foe tormented,
still evil days bring burdens hard to bear.
O give our frightened souls the sure salvation
for which, O Lord, you taught us to prepare.

And when this cup you give is filled to brimming
with bitter suffering, hard to understand,
we take it thankfully and without trembling,
out of so good, and so beloved, a hand.

Yet when again, in this same world, you give us
the joy we had, the brightness of your sun,
we shall remember all the days we lived through,
and our whole life shall then be yours alone.

Now, when your silence deeply spreads around us,
O let us hear all your creation says -
that world of sound which soundlessly invades us,
and all your children's highest hymns of praise.

In January and early February, we shall be approaching a new theme in our worship called 'Divine Encounters'. In this series we shall be focussing on those moments when God unexpectedly discloses himself. At the heart of this series is the invitation to explore both the 'via positiva' which embraces a confident faith in all God has disclosed and that can be said about him and the 'via negativa' which affirms that God is essentially mysterious and beyond our grasp.

Our God is everywhere present on earth but there seem to be 'thin places' in our lives where we suddenly become aware of his presence in way that will ultimately transform us even if nothing changes at once. When Moses encountered God at the burning bush, he still needed to find the courage to 'go down and tell old Pharaoh to let my people go'. When Joshua wrestled a blessing from God, he still needed to find the courage to meet his hostile older brother. When Elijah discovered God in the 'still small voice, he still needed to find the courage to speak God's prophetic word.

These divine disclosures may not change the 'facts on the ground', but they reminded the people who experienced them that God was still with them and his faithfulness never fails and knowing this made all the difference.

At the end of this letter, you will see the plan and the readings if you would like to focus on them. I hope to add one additional bible study in January when we can focus on these divine encounters. I'll keep you posted about when this will be.

So, these are the themes for the January and early February.

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| 10th January | Moses and the burning bush | Exodus 3 vs 1-16 |
| 17th January | Covenant | Walking together and watching over one another. |
| Our guest preacher will be Clive Burnard, regional minister in the YBA. | | |
| 24th January | Abraham and the 3 strangers | Genesis 18 |
| 31st January | Jacob's ladder | Genesis 28 vs 10 -22 |
| 7th February | Jonah | The whole book |
| 14th February | Jacob wrestles with God | Genesis 32 and 33 |
| 21st February | The still small voice | 1 Kings 19 vs 1-13 |

On the 17th of January we also intend to say thank you for Stewart and Gordon for all they have done as secretary and assistant secretary over recent years now they are retiring from these posts. Please see the message at the very end.

Your friend and pastor

Mark

PTO

