

Call to Worship

What a wildly wonderful world, God!
You made it all, with Wisdom at your side,
made earth overflow with your wonderful creations.
Send out your Spirit and they spring to life -
the whole countryside in bloom and blossom.

Psalm 104 .24,30 (The Message)

Welcome to our reflection for The Feast of Pentecost as we give thanks for the gift of God as the Holy Spirit. The words used in the scriptures for spirit are 'ruach' in Hebrew and 'pneuma' in Greek. Each mean both spirit and breath. We are giving thanks today for the very gift of God's life, breathed into us anew and equipping us for God's service.

In the reading today we will hear of the Holy Spirit experienced as wind and fire. She is also represented, in the accounts of Jesus' Baptism, as a Dove (see Matthew 3.16, Mark 1.10, Luke 3.22, John 1.32). We pick up on all this imagery in our opening prayer, a hymn from 'Singing the Faith'.

Let us pray:

Opening Prayer

(from StF 389)

Like the murmur of the dove's song,
like the challenge of her flight,
like the vigour of the wind's rush,
like the new flame's eager might:

All: Come, Holy Spirit, come.

To the members of Christ's body,
to the branches of the Vine,
to the Church in faith assembled,
to her midst as gift and sign:

All: Come, Holy Spirit, come.

With the healing of division,
with the ceaseless voice of prayer,
with the power to love and witness,
with the peace beyond compare:

All: Come, Holy Spirit, come.

Carl P Daw

When I was training for ordination I studied for several months at a place near Geneva, Switzerland, called The Ecumenical Institute. It's part of The World Council of Churches. Located at Chateau Bossey, near the tiny village of Céligny, it overlooks Lake Geneva. The area has been popular for many years with the rich and famous and both the actor Richard Burton, and the author Alistair MacLean are buried in Céligny. At the Ecumenical Institute I studied with people from all over the world, and from many different church traditions and denominations. Many different languages were spoken. We shared songs, and read scripture, in languages from Tagalog to Hindi and Tamil to Swahili. In worship we said Lord's Prayer at

the same time in our own languages and most of us ended at the same time. But the Finnish language has long word structures and it was always Tiina, a Lutheran Deacon from Finland, who briefly carried on when we'd all ended. I still know that "kunnia iankaikkesti" is Finnish for "glory forever". Amen!

Pentecost is a Jewish festival falling fifty days after Passover. On the first Pentecost after Jesus' death and resurrection, people as always had gathered in Jerusalem for the festival from all over the Mediterranean world - and beyond. Many languages would have been spoken there too. It was in that context that God's breath was breathed anew into the followers of the Resurrected Christ.

Our reading today:

Acts the Apostles, Chapter 2, verses 1 - 21

1 When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. 2 And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting. 3 Divided tongues, as of fire, appeared among them, and a tongue rested on each of them. 4 All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.

5 Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem. 6 And at this sound the crowd gathered and was bewildered, because each one heard them speaking in the native language of each. 7 Amazed and astonished, they asked, 'Are not all these who are speaking Galileans?' 8 And how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language? 9 Parthians, Medes, Elamites, and residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, 10 Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya belonging to Cyrene, and visitors from Rome, both Jews and proselytes, 11 Cretans and Arabs—in our own languages we hear them speaking about God's deeds of power.' 12 All were amazed and perplexed, saying to one another, 'What does this mean?' 13 But others sneered and said, 'They are filled with new wine.'

14 But Peter, standing with the eleven, raised his voice and addressed them: 'Men of Judea and all who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you, and listen to what I say. 15 Indeed, these are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only nine o'clock in the morning. 16 No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

17 "In the last days it will be, God declares,
that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh,
and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and your young men shall see visions,
and your old men shall dream dreams.

18 Even upon my slaves, both men and women,
in those days I will pour out my Spirit;
and they shall prophesy.

19 And I will show portents in the heaven above
and signs on the earth below,
blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

20 The sun shall be turned to darkness
and the moon to blood,
before the coming of the Lord's great and glorious day.

21 Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

There is humour in the Bible. Plenty of it. Peter's opening words, of what is sometimes called the first sermon in the church's life, are an example. As the disciples spoke in diverse languages someone accused them of being drunk. Peter's riposte "They are not drunk. It is only 9 o'clock in the morning" might have caused a few disciples to shuffle uneasily as they maybe recalled many a morning after an evening's feasting. Presumably the morning after the Wedding at Cana was one (John 2.1-11).

What are we to make of the imagery used to describe the Holy Spirit. We hear of wind and of fire. Here is new creation, think of the opening verses of Genesis where a wind, or spirit of God, "ruach", sweeps over the waters (Genesis 1.2). Here too is God's very presence, think of God encountered by Moses in the flames of the burning bush (Exodus 3). Think of God guiding his people as a pillar of fire by night (Exodus 13.21 among other references). The Holy Spirit is portrayed as God's very being, gifted anew to God's people, but it doesn't belong to them.

The Holy Spirit's presence in all of creation is acknowledged by the imagery used. In his first encounter with Nicodemus, Jesus says "The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where goes" (John 3.8). We can't control wind, neither can we always control fire. Both can be immensely powerful, and sometimes destructive, but also creative. Wind and spirit are the same words in Hebrew and Greek as for breath - new life. Fire can be purifying and creative, powering the potters kiln or the metalworkers furnace. To these we add the Dove or, in the traditions of Celtic Christians, the Goose. Both come from imagery of God brooding over the waters of creation. It's echoed in our next prayer, from the Iona Community:

Prayer

(from StF 393)

She sits like a bird, brooding on the waters,
Hovering on the chaos of the world's first day;
She sighs and she sings, mothering creation,
Waiting to give birth to all the Word will say.

She wings over earth, resting where she wishes,
Lighting close at hand or soaring through the skies;
She nests in the womb, welcoming each wonder,
Nourishing potential hidden to our eyes.

She dances in fire, startling her spectators,
Waking tongues of ecstasy where dumbness reigned;
She weans and inspires all whose hearts are open,
Nor can she be captured, silenced or restrained.

For she is the Spirit, one with God in essence,
Gifted by the Saviour in eternal love;
She is the key opening the scriptures,
Enemy of apathy and heavenly dove.

John L Bell and Graham Maule,
Wild Goose Worship Group

We are in a time of new creation. Churches will not "return to normal" when church buildings reopen. We'll be in a new situation with new ways of meeting, new ways of worshipping and, as is already happening, new ways of serving each other and the community.

The Holy Spirit can breath new life into our church community and will guide our journey. As we emerge from lock-down we can find new hope because, as the Prophet Joel said, quoted by Peter:

“Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy,
and the young shall see visions,
and the old shall dream dreams”

(Acts 2.17, Joel 2.28)

Dreaming dreams, sharing visions - and using gifts. God has given you as an individual, and us as a church community, different gifts and abilities. Pray this Pentecost to discern what God wants you to offer to this new situation. Pray that as we emerge from despair, the breath of God's very life will transform and renew us.

Let us pray:

Prayer

(StF 399)

When deep despair casts out all light
and hope is wearing thin;
come Spirit, dance with gentle grace,
shine through the dullness we embrace
and make the colours sing;
and make the colours sing.

When greed dictates that children die
and poverty holds sway;
come Spirit, burn as living flame,
prompt us to act to end this shame;
cast apathy away;
cast apathy away.

When colour, lifestyle, creed or name
cause groundless hate and fear;
come Spirit, weave a web of peace,
that prejudice and violence cease;
reveal God's purpose here;
reveal God's purpose here.

When guilt and fear tear us apart
and faith's a bitter thing;
come Spirit, dance with gentle grace,
shine through the dullness we embrace
and make God's colours sing;
and make God's colours sing.

Michaela Youngson

Closing remarks

Thank you for spending time reflecting and praying with me again this morning. Links to live worship are on the resource site. Also, if you'd like to sing the hymns I've used this morning, you'll find links on the site and on the printable form of this reflection.

Take care, stay safe. The best of all is God is with us!

Hymns:

Like the murmur of the dove's song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QN9N64JmRSY>

Enemy of apathy (She sits like a bird):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwsiXzcYFis>

When deep despair casts out all light. Tune only (Repton):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GUNIkNESRbw>

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Let us humble ourselves
under God's mighty hand,
that God might exalt us in due time.

Let us cast our anxieties on God,
because God cares for us. *(1 Peter 5 .6,7)*

This is the tenth Sunday that we've been unable to meet for worship in our church building. We don't have a date yet for when we might be able to gather there again. Some people are saying that maybe we'll be able to have services in the open air before we get back into the building. Maybe so, but for the time being, outdoor gatherings aren't permitted either.

Coincidentally I could have been preaching in the open air today had Coronavirus not intervened. I'd been approached to lead the annual service at a place called Fishley Church. There isn't a church building at Fishley - there isn't usually a congregation either! More about that in a moment but first, let us pray:

Opening Prayer

Almighty God,
you are with us in these uncertain times,
whether we gather alone or in company.
Warm our hearts
with an awareness of your love,
that we may proclaim your name
in word and service.
In the name of Jesus Christ.
Amen.

Fishley Church was a large stone, most of which has either been buried or carted away. It's in Fishley Lane, on the border of Pelsall and Bloxwich. There's a local tradition that John Wesley preached there. John Wesley, and his brother Charles - were two of the founders of the movement we now know as The Methodist Church - they were both Church of England clerics who preached widely across the country in the 18th century. Although John Wesley didn't mention it in his very comprehensive journal, it's believed he preached at Fishley at least once while journeying from Birmingham to Stafford. The large rock he would have stood on to preach - he needed to, he was only 5 foot 6 inches high - became known as Fishley Church and, to this day in normal times, local Methodist churches organise an open air service there on Aldersgate Sunday, the Sunday closest to 24th May. It doesn't get any closer than this year. Hence I had an invitation - then of course everyone's plans changed.

Our quotes from scripture today come from one of today's set readings, The First Letter of Peter, verses from Chapters 4 and 5. (1 Peter 4 .12-14, 5 .6-11)

¹² Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that is taking place among you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you. ¹³ But rejoice in so far as you are sharing Christ's sufferings, so that you may also be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed. ¹⁴ If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory, which is the Spirit of God, is resting on you. (1 Peter 4 .12-14)

John Wesley knew about fiery ordeals. As a five year old he had been rescued from the inferno of his father's Rectory at Epworth in Lincolnshire. It wasn't the only fire. The Revd Samuel Wesley seemed to attract arson attacks. In this blaze John was grabbed from an upstairs window just as the roof collapsed. He would later refer to himself as "a brand plucked from the burning" in the manner of the Old Testament's Joshua (Zechariah 3.2). John knew God had a purpose for him - the problem was that, for much of his life, he struggled to find what that was.

John Wesley, and his younger brother Charles, would have a lasting effect on Christianity as a world faith. They both spent much of their lives journeying - both spiritually as they questioned faith, and physically as they travelled proclaiming it. They were great preachers, a gift they seem to have inherited especially from their mother Susannah, rather than their father Samuel. Susannah could attract crowds with her preaching - Samuel seemed to attract arsonists.

John in particular had long periods of disquiet, and inner turmoil, in thinking about what his relationship with God was. At Oxford University he adopted an immaculately ordered prayer life, enthusiastically accompanied by good works such as prison visiting. It was a life style that was so methodical it earned him and his friends the nickname Methodists. But methodical is one thing, calmness is another and calmness of the soul eluded John.

During a sea crossing to the Americas in 1735 his mind was full of terrors that emphasised his doubts. During a storm, he felt that he was staring death in the face, and wrote "I was unfit, for I was unwilling to die". He was faced with his own mortality - a feeling that during a pandemic maybe we can emphasise with. John's unease about his seeming approaching death contrasted with the assured, calm faith of a group of German Christians who were sharing the journey, including some Moravians. The Moravians faith, even in the teeth of an Atlantic storm, would come to shape much of John Wesley's life.

Although, as siblings do, John and Charles Wesley had their fallings out, it's remarkable how their experiences of faith mirrored each other. Charles' great hymn, Love Divine, relates a journey in what John would call holiness. John could surely relate to the reference to a 'trembling heart' in Charles' first verse:

Love divine, all loves excelling,
joy of heaven to earth come down,
fix in us thy humble dwelling,
all they faithful mercies crown.
Jesu, though art all compassion,
pure, unbounded love thou art;
visit us with thy salvation
enter every trembling heart.

John's time in Georgia was an abject disaster. It included the very messy collapse in one relationship with a woman and his entanglement with another. They would not be the

only disasters of relationships with women. He returned to England downhearted, feeling a failure, and certain that the onus was on him to put things right with God.

And so we come to Aldersgate.

Aldersgate is an area of London named after one of the gates in the old Roman Wall. For John and Charles Wesley it would be the gateway to an awareness of a new relationship.

In the space of three days in 1738, in different buildings at Aldersgate, but both near where the Museum of London stands today, first Charles on 21st May, and then John on 24th May, experienced an assurance of God's love. John described it in his journal:

"I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death".

Undoubtedly, after years of trembling hearts, the experience shaped Charles' words in Love Divine:

Come, almighty to deliver,
let us all thy life receive;
suddenly return and never,
never more thy temples leave.
Thee we would be always blessing,
serve thee as thy hosts above,
pray, and praise thee, without ceasing,
glory in thy perfect love.

This is often referred to as a conversion, but to what. The Wesley's were already committed Christians in word and in deed - their prayers and preaching, prison visiting and care of the sick, were more committed and devote than most others. Maybe it should be seen as a conversion in understanding faith - now experiencing in heart and head confidence in salvation. Doubts would still be there, confidence would still be undermined on occasions. But the Aldersgate events were clearly significant.

Back in the Oxford years John, doubting his own faith and therefore his worthiness to preach to others had been told by Peter Bohler, a German Christian, to:

"Preach faith till you have it;
and then, because you have it,
you will preach faith."

And so it was. Charles and John embarked on a preaching ministry and, in Charles' case also a hymn writing one - some suggest 10,000 hymns in all - that would bring thousands to faith in the brothers' lifetimes and millions in later generations. It was a ministry that would still have opposition. For example, John preached over 40 times in Wednesbury in the Black Country, occasions that were often quite eventful. On one occasion he was dragged off his horse by his hair, on another grabbed by a mob and taken to local magistrates who were unimpressed with the mob's complaints - mainly due to the fact that the magistrates had been woken up in the middle of the night - and on another occasion Wesley was hit on the head by a brick. The said brick, or what is reputed to be

it, is in a display case in Central Methodist Church, Wednesbury. A Methodist relic if ever there was one.

At its heart of preaching was that God's grace has been given for all. That through Grace the believer can attain holiness - or Christian perfection. The state of being restored into a oneness with God. Charles put it this way:

Finish then thy new creation,
pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation,
perfectly restored in thee:
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Prayer:

May the God of grace,
who has called us
to to his eternal glory in Christ,
restore, support, strengthen
and establish us.
To him be power for ever and ever.

Amen

(1 Peter 5 .10,11)

Closing remarks

Thank you for spending time reflecting and praying with me again this morning. Worship continues at, among other places, via a link on the resource site (address below) to Birmingham District of The Methodist Church.

Take care, stay safe, and in the words that were among the last uttered by John Wesley on his deathbed, now at ease with his own mortality;

The best of all is God is with us!

Meditation for Sunday 17th May (6th Sunday of Easter)

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

The Father loves you,
The Son loves you,
The Spirit loves you.
Come and share God's love.

Introduction

Gathering Prayer

Let us pray.
Spirit of truth, come close to us.
Unite us in the body of Christ.
Enable us to worship God in Spirit and in truth.
Help us to support and encourage each other.
Help us to love, as we are loved.
Spirit of truth, come and abide in us. **Amen**

Reading: John 14 .15 - 21

15 Jesus said: 'If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you for ever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. 18 'I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. 19 In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. 20 On that day you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you. 21 They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me; and those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.'

Reflection:

The annual Christian Aid Week has been part of my life for almost almost as long as I can remember. When I was growing up in Pelsall there was always a Christian Aid sponsored walk on the Saturday of Christian Aid Week. Someone posted a video of one from the early 1970s online a few weeks ago. It was astonishing to see how many people walked, a couple of hundred at least, and most were young people. The walk was ten or twelve miles for those aged under-13, their finish was in places such as Shenstone, or Gentleshaw on Cannock Chase. There was then the option for older walkers to complete the full twenty or twenty two miles back to Pelsall. It was very well organised with checkpoints and refreshments every mile and crossing wardens at busy roads, and lifts available for people who dropped out on the way. This was also my first experience of ecumenical co-operation as it was organised jointly by St Michael's C of E and Pelsall Methodist churches.

Some years ago my fundraising for Christian Aid took me further afield. In both 2008 and 2012 I cycled from London to Paris. Each ride was over four days and we rode into Paris

on a Saturday, the day before the Tour de France finished on the Champs Elysée on the Sunday afternoon. Our Eurostar on the Sunday wasn't until the evening so that meant that, in 2012, I was there when Bradley Wiggins became the first British man ever to win the Tour de France. The ride was immensely popular, even with people who knew nothing about Christian Aid's work, simply because it finished in Paris in time for the finale of Le Tour every year. Each day, before we set off on that day's ride, the organisers would tell us all a little about Christian Aid's work. How the amount we raised each mile we travelled could supply so many wells for clean water, or so many school places for children.

New friendships were made during the journeys undertaken in both the Sponsored Walks a Bike Rides. Indeed it was on a Sponsored Walk in the 1980's that I came to know a Sri Lankan Anglican priest called Kumara Illangesinge. He'd been asked to officially start the walk, and I'd collected him from Selly Oak Colleges earlier that morning. The idea was he'd walk the first mile and then someone would take him back to Selly Oak. But we started talking and he ended up walking ten miles with me! Some years later I met another Sri Lankan Anglican priest Duleep DeChickera, who I'd met while studying at the World Council of Churches, and I visited them in Sri Lanka. It was a source of great amusement in Sri Lanka that Kumara had walked ten miles - he wasn't known for exercise.

Kumara is married to Lakmini, who is an ophthalmic surgeon. Some of her work involved caring for the eyes of workers on the tea plantations. I was able to visit some of the plantations, not the ones that are shown to tourists, but ones where levels of poverty and ill health are even worse. It was there that I was able to see some of Christian Aid's work in action, where they worked through local partners on health education especially, at that time in the early 1990s, about HIV and Aids.

Relationships with those we meet on journeys are important in life. Some are short friendships, fellow travellers on the road for a while, chatting while repairing a puncture on the bike ride, or sticking a plaster on a blistered foot on the sponsored walk. Other friendships made become life long, relationships that open up new experiences and new insights.

In today's Gospel reading Jesus is addressing the disciples on the evening before he dies on the Cross. He talks of his relationship with them. A relationship that is about to change in ways that they do not yet understand. But holding that relationship together beyond death, and as they will find out beyond resurrection, will be love. Love that is at the heart of the commandments Jesus had given them to love God and love their neighbours. A little earlier in this conversation with the disciples Jesus said:

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love one for another. (*John, Chapter 13, verses 34,35*)

As Christians we are called to let the love of God in Jesus Christ flow through our hearts and lives. Supporting Christian Aid, and other similar groups, is part of that. Through Christian Aid love flows not only to and from those we personally journey with through life, but also with people right across the world. Neighbours are people at home and those who are far away. Whether it's on Sri Lankan tea plantations, in Kenyan villages or Covid19 stricken refugee camps in Cox's Bazaar in Bangladesh. God's love is revealed when we love one another.

Meditative Prayer

'For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come... will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.' (*Romans 8:38-39*)

Let us pray

God of heaven and earth,
in these times of isolation,
apart from loved ones distant from friends
away from neighbours,
thank you that there is nothing
in all of creation,
not even coronavirus,
that is able to separate us from your love.

And may your love that never fails
continue to be shared
through the kindness of strangers
looking out for each other,
for neighbours near and far
all recognising our shared vulnerability,
each of us grateful for every breath,
and willing everyone to know the gift
of a full and healthy life.

Keep us all in your care. **Amen**

Closing remarks

Thank you for spending time reflecting and praying with me again this morning. The address of the resource website is at the bottom of the screen. Opo along to there and make a donation to the work of Christian Aid if you are able to and you haven't done so already. Remember that there's live worship available this morning from Birmingham District of the Methodist Church, and again the link is on the resource site. That starts just before 10.30am, there was a bit of a technical glitch last week which meant that it started a little bit late but stick with it if you are unable to access it immediately, it will be along shortly. There are plenty of other links and material on the resource site too. Please have a look and enjoy a browse.

Take care. Stay safe. Best of all, God is with us.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray:

Go in peace to live in love,
to show God's love,
to receive God's love
-everywhere,
and at all times.

Amen.

Meditation for Sunday 10th May (5th Sunday of Easter)

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

You're my cave to hide in,
my cliff to climb.
Be my safe leader,
be my true mountain guide.. *Psalm 31 .3 (The Message)*

Introduction

Gathering Prayer

Let us pray.
Lord Jesus,
You are the Way into the future
and we will walk your Way of the Cross.
You are the Truth which will never let us down,
and we will trust your Truth.
You are the Life which death itself cannot destroy,
and we will live in you.
Amen

*Ian Cowie, in 'Fire and Bread' (Editor, Ruth Burgess)
Wild Goose Publications*

Reading: John 14 .1 - 7

Jesus said: 'Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling-places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way to the place where I am going.' Thomas said to him, 'Lord, we do not know where you are going. How can we know the way?' Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.'

Reflection:

I love a good map! In fact not only do I have a lot of maps, I even have books about maps and their history. A map is essential if you want to get from A - B and B is an unfamiliar destination. Of course these days maps come in GPS form too. SatNavs and Smartphones will get you from A - B - but they can't tell you everything that a map does. What's over that hill on the right hand side? What's down that tempting looking country lane I just passed? Give me a paper map anytime, it's a wealth of information and an art form in it's own right.

Not even maps can stop you getting lost though sometimes. Together with my youngest daughter we used to be members of West Bromwich Mountaineering Club. Yes there is such a group and, it's one of the oldest walking clubs in the Midlands. They went to Snowdonia and the Lake District. It was on a trip to Cader Idris that maps - of any form - proved their limitations. The two of us were near the summit when the mist came down.

Visibility dropped to several metres. Now a map was hopeless, and our smartphones lacked a signal. We were on a plateau near the summit so even just walking uphill, or down, wasn't a simple solution. Fortunately we had a compass and, after a couple of false trails, we found the right path back on the way to the summit. Once there there was a simple shelter, a resting place, where we could warm up and take nourishment we'd taken with us. For a while though our hearts were troubled.

“Do not let your hearts be troubled” (*John 14 .1*)

The opening words of today's Gospel. The disciples hearts were troubled after some of the things Jesus had said about his approaching death. Indeed his own heart had been troubled too. Again, these references and others are in the notes in the printed form of this reflection which is online, you can browse them later.

Jesus then talks about going ahead to prepare a place for them in his Father's house where there are many dwelling-places (mansions in some translations). He then speaks of himself being the way to the place he is going. Thomas sparks up saying that as that destination is unknown, how can they know the way. Jesus replies:

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (*John 14 .6*)

He's the right path, the map, and the compass!

Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night before his death. It's John's version of the Last Supper in the other Gospels. He's telling them that his death will not be an end but a journey he is undertaking for them - for us. Therefore this is a very popular reading for funerals. But there's a message here about this life - as well as eternal life.

In his Gospel John uses a slightly different timeline to Matthew, Mark and Luke. In the other three Gospels the Last Supper is the Jewish Passover feast. In John's Gospel Jesus' dies on the Passover afternoon - just as the sacrificial lambs were being killed in the Temple. He is, says John, recalling the words of another John:

“The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (*John 1 .29*)

The Passover looms large in this text. The Passover festival recalled the journey of God's people, the Jews, from slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. It was a journey that lasted a generation. There were false trails and many, many times of troubled hearts.

I've put two passages about that journey in the notes. In Deuteronomy, Chapter 1, Moses urges his people to trust in God who goes before them on the way to seek out a place to camp. In Exodus, Chapter 33, God promises “my presence will go with you, and I will give you rest”. Early in the first century a Jewish commentary, that would have been known about by the time John wrote his Gospel, rendered that latter passage as “will prepare a resting place for you”. The similarities with John's Gospel are clear.

John 14 is as much a passage about the here and now as it is about life after death. The disciples hearts were troubled, ours are troubled in the present crisis. Thomas struggled to know where they were going or how to get there, so to do many people today. The future for the disciples, and for us is uncertain.

“I am the way, the truth, and the life” (*John 14 .6*)

In Christ we have the place to rest on the journey, the place to shelter in the storm and the path on which he will guide us on the way.

Prayer

High on a mountain path,
the weather closing in,
the air wet, as though we're in a cloud.
It's hard to see ahead,
can't see the way we've come;
need to find some shelter
and some rest.
Silence shrouds us, darkness falls.

No compass. No map.
No satnav. No GPS.
Lost.
Then in a place
where weather split the rock,
sundering splinters,
making a cavern,
We find refuge.

On life's bewildering pathway we are just as lost,
forsaken and 'Godless',
that's how it seems,
until we find you've found us,
known us all along,
every step of the way,
our refuge and hope,
safe guide and God.

Amen

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Closing remarks

Thank you for spending time reflecting and praying with me this morning.
Remember that there's live worship available from the Methodist District, via the link on my resource site, at 10.30am. There are other links and material there too.
Please have a look and enjoy a browse.

Take care. Stay safe. Best of all, God is with us.

Closing Prayer

Let us pray:

The hand of God holds us,
the wisdom of God guides us,
the peace of God surrounds us,
as we journey into our unknown future.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

Notes:

The disciples have troubled hearts because they have heard that:

- Jesus is about to go to his death (Chapter 13 .31-33)
- He'll be betrayed by one of them (Chapter 13 .21)
- Even Peter will deny having ever known him (Chapter 13 .38)

Jesus own heart has been troubled when:

- He saw Mary weeping about her brother Lazarus (Chapter 11 .33)
- He spoke of the inevitability of his own death (Chapter 12 .27)
- When he told the disciples that one of them would betray him (Chapter 13 .21)

Deuteronomy 1 .29 - 33

29 I said to you, 'Have no dread or fear of them. 30 The Lord your God, who goes before you, is the one who will fight for you, just as he did for you in Egypt before your very eyes, 31 and in the wilderness, where you saw how the Lord your God carried you, just as one carries a child, all the way that you travelled until you reached this place. 32 But in spite of this, you have no trust in the Lord your God, 33 who **goes before you on the way** to seek out a **place for you to camp**, in fire by night, and in the cloud by day, to show you the route you should take.'

Exodus 33 .12 - 14

12 Moses said to the Lord, 'See, you have said to me, "Bring up this people"; but you have not let me know whom you will send with me. Yet you have said, "I know you by name, and you have also found favour in my sight." 13 Now if I have found favour in your sight, show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favour in your sight. Consider too that this nation is your people.' 14 He said, '**My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest.**'

Neofiti Targum (a Jewish Commentary of 1st Century CE (AD)) on Exodus 33 .14:

"The glory of my shekinah (presence) will accompany amongst you **and will prepare a resting place for you**"

(I am indebted to Andy Fishburne, a Methodist Minister in the Isle of Man) for the references to Deuteronomy, Exodus and Neofiti Targum - via his website www.andyfishburne.com)

Meditation for Sunday 3rd May (4th Sunday of Easter)

Call to Worship

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!
He is Risen indeed! Alleluia!

Jesus says,
'I am the gate.'
Come, and be loved.
Come, and find peace.
Come, and find life
in all its abundance. **Amen.**

Introduction

Gathering Prayer

Let us pray.

Good Shepherd,
who cares for the sheep,
tend our hurts with your healing oil.
Keep us safe,
protect us and guide us,
and let us walk in your ways, always. **Amen.**

Reading: John 10 .1 - 10

'Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.' Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

So again Jesus said to them, 'Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.'

Reflection:

You know what it's like. Walking in half way through a conversation. You struggle to understand what the discussion is about. You've worry that you might have missed something of interest. Walking in half way through someone else's argument is even worse.

Hearing those words from John's Gospel is a little like that. Chapter 10, of which we heard the beginning today, is the climax of a series of arguments spread over several

chapters. They are disagreements, questions and challenges between Jesus and the Pharisees - Jewish religious leaders of the time, some of whom maintained a very rigorous approach to religious laws.

So what have we missed. The latest episode of disagreement, in Chapter 9, follows an encounter Jesus has with a man who had been blind from birth.

It was the belief back then that his blindness would most likely be the result of the sin of his parents. Jesus rejects that idea and sets about giving the man sight, for the first time. The healing involves Jesus rubbing his own spit, mixed with soil, on the man's eyes. Not exactly compliant with these days of social distancing!

The problem is, Jesus has worked this miracle on the Jewish sabbath - which some of the pharisees thought was a great sin. Jesus and the man previously blind said that the healing was from God. Some of the pharisees stated that was impossible - how could God act through sin - the breaking of the sabbath law - and through a sinner, meaning Jesus who'd broken that law!

Finally the man previously blind challenges the pharisees saying that if they can't see what is going on and that Jesus' actions come from God it must be they, the Pharisees, who are blind! For that the pharisees throw him out of the assembly.

What then does all this have to do with sheep, shepherds and gates?

The clue is in the Book of Ezekiel - part of our Old Testament, the Jewish scriptures, which Jesus would have known by heart. Chapter 34 of Ezekiel deals with false shepherds and a true shepherd. The image of a shepherd as a leader was an ancient one indeed. Moses was a shepherd, when he encountered a vision of God in the burning bush. So too was David - Israel's great king - who was an ancestor of Jesus himself.

Ezekiel's false shepherds lacked compassion, didn't feed their sheep, and failed to seek those that were lost. God is depicted as the true shepherd, full of compassion and searching for the lost. That imagery of false and true shepherds is reflected in the contrast between hard hearted religious leaders, such as some of the pharisees, and Jesus, full of the compassion of God and committed to searching and rescuing the lost.

But to understand fully about gates and sheepfolds we need to know a little about animal husbandry - of the first century too!

In 1st century Palestine there would have been two common types of sheepfold. In the villages and towns a communal one, with a gatekeeper who would open and close the wooden gate when sheep were being brought in or taken out by their own shepherd. The sheep would follow their own shepherd. But once out in the countryside there were much simpler sheepfolds. Low stone walls and an opening without a door or gate. The shepherd would lie down to sleep across that opening. In a very real sense each and every shepherd was a gate for the sheep.

John's Gospel then records Jesus adding:

Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.

In a number of places in the Jewish scriptures, our Old Testament, the phrase “going in and coming out” is used to describe a life in circumstances that are absolutely secure and

safe. On the written version of this reflection, on the resource site, there’s a few examples for you to look up.

Our coming in and going out is severely restricted at the present time. For many people locally, especially those who are physically vulnerable, there isn’t a sense of wellbeing or security. Staying in is the message we hear, and going out is for some both a memory and a future hope. Many people elsewhere in the world exist everyday with movements restricted; through fear of disease and violence, the effects of poverty and political injustice - including in the very lands that Jesus walked. But it is in such times of uncertainty and fear that faith often flourishes most.

The Resurrection faith is that Jesus still rescues his sheep, his followers, from the storms and dangers of life. Through faith in God’s love, a love that is stronger than death, - that will lead us again in our going out and our coming in - to fresh pastures where we may have life, and have it abundantly.

Thanksgiving

Let us pray:

Christ the Good Shepherd.
For your presence in our lives,
for the security you offer us,
for your life that enriches our life,
for the sense of belonging,
even when we are apart,
for our place within your sheepfold,
for our going out and our coming in,
great Shepherd of the sheep:
We praise and adore you. Amen.

Closing remarks

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Closing Prayer

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus,
thank you for abundant life;
thank you for your generous love.
Help us to love generously

that others may know the
abundance of your life.

Amen.

Notes:

“Going out and coming in” as a reference to safety and security:

Psalm 121 .8	A Psalm of God’s protection
Numbers 27 .17	The sign of a good leader
Deuteronomy 28 .6	A blessing for obedience to God
1 Kings 3 .7	A child hasn’t yet the able to go out and come in