

Dear Friends,

I have been reflecting on our experience of lockdown and our slow, unsteady emergence from the shadows into what will hopefully be the daylight of a new normality. Sometimes our hopes are raised as we are urged to get the economy going again, and then rumours circulate about new categories of people who may be required to shield. For a day or two people like Jeremy Vine lead discussions on the radio, experts are called upon for their opinions, newspapers use the process to fill more column inches, and then a Government minister declares that the anticipated possibility has been ruled out by the Government. In the meantime, I wonder what effect this is all having on people who are just trying to get on quietly with their everyday lives. I further wonder what the Scriptures have to say about it all.

My thoughts recently have inextricably been drawn to the letter to the Hebrews. I guess, as we try to reflect theologically on what society, and especially the church, has experienced in recent months themes such as journeying, pilgrimage, exile, promise and hope all have a certain relevance. In particular, the 40 years spent wandering in the wilderness by Moses and the children of Israel keep bubbling up in my consciousness. We, like them, have a shrewd idea of the Promised Land we yearn to inhabit, yet for us, as for them, the route is not clearly marked, and unexpected factors emerge which may yet cause further detours and delays. The time in the Wilderness was, however, a crucial time in the development of Israel as a community of faith. Their faith and fidelity to God was tested and bore fruit in a new community Covenant relationship with God. This laid the foundation for the moral values of Israel and Judah, set out the spiritual values on which the later temple worship was developed and eventually gave rise to the ministry of the great prophets. All of these proved to be building blocks in God's preparation for the coming of Christ and the birth of the Church. The wilderness is a harsh and brutal landscape but within it lies a hidden fruitfulness. At the coming of the rain, there blooms desert flowers of rare beauty and exquisite perfume.

The letter to the Hebrews portrays Jesus as greater than even Moses. We are encouraged with these words: *"you who share in a heavenly calling, consider Jesus"* (3:1). We are to *"hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope"*. At the same time, we are told to take care not to be led away from the living God, or become hardened of heart (3:12,13). And so, we must *"pay closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it"* (2:1).

The response of churches to the easing of lockdown will vary according to circumstances, and each Church Council will be making their own risk and resources assessments which will inform their decisions as to whether and if and how to reopen their premises. To support the local churches a circuit preaching plan has been prepared, so that churches will be able to call upon designated preachers to lead their live or online worship. None of us know for sure how the next weeks and months will develop, and so stewards and preachers are asked to liaise closely and to keep me informed via the Circuit Office. The plan is based on the best information available at the time of preparation, but you will know as well as I do that, we

are dependent upon the shifting sands of official advice. I fully understand that not all out churches will be able to open for gathered worship. Some may feel that the intimacy of online worship is preferable to the risks and restrictions involved in gathered worship. Again, it is for Church Councils to make informed and balanced decision, and these decisions made need to be reviewed in coming weeks as the pandemic changes its unpredictable course.

Some years ago, I was greatly helped by the writing of Esther de Waal, a Jewish Christian. In 1984 she wrote *“Seeking God: the way of St Benedict”*. This is a slim but powerful book which contains much inspiration. What I took away from it is the need for balance in life. For Benedict a balanced life means one containing worship, work, study and rest in appropriate proportions. Balance is also greatly to be valued in the life of our churches. Some years ago, there was an attempt to narrowly define Methodism as a *“discipleship movement shaped for mission”*. Few would argue with this as a description, but it was flawed as a definition. Its weakness was summarised by the then Principle of the Queens Foundation who asked, *“What’s wrong with being Church?”*. In other words, community life and pastoral care are just as essential as narrowly defined “mission”. Indeed, they form part of our mission! The Mission of God is a very broad concept, and the Mission of the Church is essentially a sharing in the Mission of God.

And so, our challenge in our pandemic desert wandering is to maintain spiritual balance personally and in the church. Heresy is so often the result of an overemphasis of one aspect of Christian teaching to the neglect of others. For example, speaking of mission without mentioning evangelism; or evangelism without referring to salvation or conversion; or salvation without exploring the great themes of judgement, atonement, redemption, repentance, forgiveness, adoption, regeneration, assurance, discipleship, sanctification and eternal life. And if any of these terms are unfamiliar, then this serves to demonstrate our corporate neglect of the richness of Christian teaching and our continual need for balance.

The letter to the Hebrews begins, *“Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke”* (1:1). Let us reflect on the record of God’s revelation in past days and let us listen to hear what God is saying to us in our present circumstances. In hearing the voice of God, we will find balance, strength and direction in our pandemic wilderness wanderings.

May God bless you,

Keith

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