

Dear Friends,

I have tried since March 2020 to write these letters in such a way as to lift the spirits of those who read them. I have become aware that the Bible gives an honourable place to the occasional need to lament. In Romans 12:15 St Paul tells us, *'Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep'* (AV). There is a fine balance between maintaining our own wellbeing by fostering a positive mindset and a hopeful faith as against neglecting to show appropriate understanding and empathy to those around us who may be going through difficult experiences.

This was brought home to me when watching the late evening news on TV last Friday. For some time, hopes had been raised that with the advent of the vaccines there is a real prospect for a return to normality within a reasonable time frame. Having avoided following the news closely for a few days, it seemed to me last Friday that one sombre report after another had a chilling effect on one's spirit. As if the news about the new variants was not enough, there followed a report from Walsall Manor Hospital intensive care unit.

For 5 years Walsall Manor was our local hospital and as well as having briefly been both an outpatient and an inpatient there, I had visited a much loved and respected church member in the Manor intensive care ward towards the end of his earthly journey. I had also visited many church members in other wards at the hospital. No institution is perfect, but I was aware of the caring and friendly attitude of the hard-working staff. To see the pressure under which the staff are now working and to hear the interviews that were broadcast deeply moved me, especially as I realised that the same scenario was being played out in hospitals all over the country. It became hard to fight back the tears. So much suffering. So much stress put on medics and nurses. It felt overwhelming.

Turning again to the apostle Paul, who I think was probably prone to melancholy, I read, *'Therefore we do not give up. Even though our outer person is being destroyed, our inner person is being renewed day by day. For our momentary light affliction is producing for us an absolutely incomparable eternal weight of glory. So we do not focus on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.'* 2 Cor.4:16-18.

In some approaches to talking therapy there is the concept of ‘containing’ other peoples’ emotions, as well as our own feelings in response to the sadness we might encounter in others. Paul had much suffering and hurt of his own to ‘contain’ and the churches he founded faced some very hostile reactions. It seems to me that his awareness that now is not forever helped him to contain the difficult emotions – not to bury them or deny them but to acknowledge them in such a way that they were ‘contained’ and not allowed to take control.

I wonder how this relates to Paul’s injunction to *‘Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep’*. We can genuinely care about the suffering of others and we can show appropriate empathy whilst still maintaining our own wellbeing through self-care and adopting a perspective that keeps sight of eternal realities. Last Sunday, several churches shared in a recognition or commissioning of pastoral visitors. Our pastoral teams perform essential work as part of the wider mission of the church. There may be times when pastoral visitors need support in containing the emotions they have witnessed or had triggered within themselves. A useful prayer is summed up in a hymn. As so often, Charles Wesley is the master wordsmith.

Help us to help each other, Lord,
each other’s cross to bear;
let each his friendly aid afford,
and feel another’s care.

My mind is turning increasingly to the wilderness journey of Lent. In the foreword to his designated Lent Book for 2021, Justin Welby writes, *‘As Christians we are called to relate to peoples’ experiences, to understand their hopes, dreams and interests and see how it might point towards the kingdom God has prepared for us’* (Hannah Steel, Living His Story). Sometimes this will involve rejoicing with those who rejoice. Sometimes it will mean lamenting with those who weep. But always we will keep God’s eternal Kingdom at the forefront of our mind. This will be a perpetual source of hope and inner peace and joy.

May God richly bless you,

Keith

Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.