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Hopeful or hesitant?

Given the Prime Minister's announcement this week, it is natural for us to all start looking ahead to the rest of our year, as the proposed roadmap out of lockdown unfolds.

Whether you feel hopeful or hesitant about the (potential) rate at which restrictions will be lifted, I know for certain that I will be striving to maintain many aspects from my "lockdown routine" far past the 21 June.

It is as if, amongst the ups and downs of the last year, I have been gifted the ability to be truly present in my day to day life. Despite the anxieties and chaos that have arisen at times, I have developed a much better understanding of what makes my mind tick, and have been able to take better care of my mental and physical health as a result. Like many of the stories that we have already heard, *I have* spent more time in the kitchen deliberating over something nutritious to snack on – rather than working through a lunch break, hunched over a keyboard covered in crumbs! *I have* found genuine joy in taking my daily walk with my partner or a friend, discovering more about the area that I live in. *I have* been able to regularly check in and continue strengthening my friendships, using creative means which would have ordinarily never crossed our minds.

This is a stark contrast to the life that I had been living, with the mythical work-life balance finally within reach. A reality rather than something aspirational that only a few could be afforded if their lifestyle permitted it.

I know that I have been, and still count myself to be, very lucky. Going forward into the year as businesses begin to fully reopen, it may be that I have to actively set reminders on my phone, telling me to get out and enjoy a lunchtime walk. I may have to spend an afternoon at the weekend to plan my meals and prep all my healthy snacks for the working week ahead. Whatever small thing it takes for me to remember to prioritise those nourishing things in my daily life, that can help to make sense of what's going on in the present moment - and I hope that you will be able to do the same.

Rachael, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Matthew 4:1-11

Reflection

Throughout the scriptures, the wilderness represents a place of preparation, a place of waiting for God's next move, a place of learning to trust in God's mercy. The Gospel accounts of the temptation of Jesus tell of the forty days and nights Jesus remains in the wilderness, without food, getting ready for what comes next. I wonder if there is, in a simple way, a parallel with our waiting in lockdown; a period which could be described by many as a time of 'wilderness'. We have for some time been unable to meet in a way which many of us have been used to. We have been unable to fully use buildings we might hold, host courses and events, and invite people into our space.

Perhaps the lessons for us as 'church' through the pandemic about who holds power, who is the host and who is the guest are ones worth further reflecting on. It strikes me that we need to learn how to become guests in the rural context before we can become a neighbour. Relationships take time to build; trust needs to be earned; people need to know that we are here for the long haul, not merely here as their 'friend' for the next eight weeks whilst they attend our courses.

Over the pandemic, I have been contemplating Jesus' modelling of powerlessness and vulnerability by being a guest in our world, by letting go and dwelling among us in our place and space. I encountered an exegesis of the temptation of Jesus, which made me more aware of the power dynamics at play, and the immediacy of the solutions offered by the devil; that by resisting these, Jesus was quite probably rejecting the role of a host. I was again reminded of these in our reading.

Jesus, a compassionate person, would want to feed the hungry. Bread for the hungry would also confirm Jesus' messiah-ship and draw people to him. In turning the stones into bread, there was a temptation to once and for all solve world hunger; if Jesus can turn stones into bread, just imagine the many ways that he can improve people's lives—and compel their allegiance. Could it be that Jesus chooses the route of a guest, and addresses hunger in a very different way, through his followers? What might tackling poverty, injustice and need in our rural communities look like if we similarly are to adopt the posture of a guest?

At the top of the temple, Jesus is next tempted with religious power – jump, and everyone will know who you are – instantly everyone will come to worship you; you'll be in charge. It's tempting to us – to be the host of masses, to see our rural church as the place where scores of people flock, but Jesus again chooses the route of a guest, 'they will know who I am through my friends.' I wonder if one of the legacies of lockdown will be smaller, perhaps more fragile gatherings around the kitchen table more than the altar.

Finally, Jesus is then offered political power: 'you can be on the world throne and tell everyone what to do, you can be in charge' – but Jesus chose the route of a guest and refused the power of politics. The rejection of power and position challenges me and the posture I adopt for mission, especially in a rural community where it is relatively easy to dominate and hold influence. I reflect on my roles as a Parish Councillor and treasurer of our village hall, and somewhat uncomfortably ask myself, am I doing these out of wanting to be a neighbour, or wanting to be known? Perhaps over Lent, we should each reflect on how we can move from hosts to guests to neighbour to family; my guess is that it is in the final one, as true family, that we will make the most significant missional impact.

Response

- Reflect on your own context and ask yourself what posture you have been adopting. Could there be the challenge of rather than trying to solve every issue in your community, what might it look like to ask others to help you.
- Pray for your immediate physical neighbour. If appropriate, ask their advice regarding your garden, a favourite recipe of theirs or a good walk they could recommend.
- Send a thank you card to your Parish or Town council, thanking them for all they have done over the past year.
- If you are part of a rural congregation, ask is there anything that we could do better around a kitchen table than we could the altar. Then seek someone who is prepared to offer you their kitchen, they don't necessarily need to be a follower of Jesus, simply willing to host you.

Prayer

May your love that never fails
strengthen and encourage us,
calming the anxious
healing the sick,
ministering through your church –
your washed hands
and feet on earth –
dispersed, yet still present
virtual but still connected
apart but still united.

As we learn to let go of power
and our tendency to control,
help us to embrace an open heart
and an open mind -
open to where you are already at work,
joining you and others there,
as guests.

God in your mercy,
hear our prayer.

Amen.

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