

Dear Friends,

I have been privileged to attend a Day Conference (Zoom) arranged by the South East Methodist District with guest speaker the Revd. Roger Walton, ex-President of the Methodist Conference. Roger chose as his theme the word "Rupture". In a sense the pandemic has been a massive rupture in the life of the nation and our own personal lives. The spiritual rhythm of worship has been dislocated and arguably this has affected preachers as much as anyone. The plaintive cry of Psalm 13, "How long Lord" resonates deeply for us.

Of course, there are, as Roger pointed out, other ruptures. Brexit is one as is the environmental crisis and the increasing move towards separation and nationalism and sectarianism evidenced in several countries. Perhaps the rupture that affects us most deeply and most personally is the rupture of bereavement which radically reshapes our personal world. Roger shared his experience of this. Just when he and his wife were looking forward to having more time for each other after he was to sit down after 40 years of active ministry, they had to receive the news that she had been diagnosed with a life limiting illness that would deprive them of a shared retirement.

Walter Brueggemann, in his book 'The Message of the Psalms', identifies three key themes: orientation, disorientation and new orientation. My guess is that many of us are presently experiencing a sense of disorientation, and I confess that this is my experience also. Psalm 13 "How long Lord" is a recurring theme in our hearts and minds. Importantly after disorientation we do not have re-orientation (a return to old patterns) but new orientation (a discovery of new ways of being).

Roger referred to Barbara Glasson's book for Lent, 'Reflections on the Water', published in January 2021. In it she speaks of events which reframe our understanding of the past. I consider the pandemic to be such an event. The experience of lockdown, and how it has affected places of worship, requires us to ask searching questions about what our churches are for, as we approach the recovery phase of the pandemic. Specifically, what is the Methodist Church for and what is each local branch of the church for? If other organisations are having to restructure following the rupture of the pandemic, can we expect the Church to continue as if nothing has happened? These are hard questions which perhaps we would rather not face.

Roger referred to the thread of lament, which runs through the Psalms. Lament can help us to find our way through the darkness and to discover how to be faithful in a changed context. What is it that you have lost? Some have experienced a sense of loss of power, others a loss of choice. I wonder what you feel that you have lost in the last twelve months. What has the pandemic taken away from you? You may feel that the wilderness of lockdown has been a place of hidden fruitfulness and subtle blessings.

Here are the questions which Roger asked the ministers on the conference to consider:

*'What has been rupture for you? What was lost?*

*How have those around you and in your care experienced disruption during the pandemic?*

*How has your prayer life been during these months?*

*Write a Psalm of Lament for the Pandemic or some other form of rupture.'*

For many people Methodism is an activist religion with many opportunities for service. Sadly, these opportunities have been greatly curtailed in the last 12 months. I wonder if the flip side of this struggle has been the opportunity to deepen our spirituality. It was following a spiritual struggle that Jacob was given a new name. In wrestling with the questions posed by the pandemic we have the potential to forge a new identity in relationship with God, our Christian fellowship, and our local community. I wonder how we will adjust to the renewed hurly burly of frantic activity when we re-emerge from the rupture of the pandemic.

I have heard people share personal stories of the effect of the rupture in family life due to the pandemic. How hard it has been for many people to be unable to spend time with their wider family. I thank God that the road out of the pandemic has now been set out and we look forward to meeting up when we are out of the lockdown wilderness. In the meantime, a great blessing of recent times has been the work done by Roger Walton and others on the Methodist Way of Life. This is not dependent on buildings or on physically meeting together but is something that can bind us together into a spiritual community wherever we are and whoever we are with.

May God be with you until we meet (in person) again!

Keith

Revd Keith C. Beckingham, Superintendent Minister.