

Prayer of praise

You created all things, O God,
and are worthy of our praise for ever.

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honour and power.

For you have created all things,
and by your will they have their being.

You are worthy, O Lamb, for you were slain,
and by your blood you ransomed for God
saints from every tribe and language and nation.

You made them to be a kingdom and priest
serving our God, and they will reign with you on earth.

To the One who sits on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might,
for ever and ever. Amen.

You created all things, O God,
and are worthy of our praise for ever.¹

[John 21:1-14](#)

This week, I was going to continue following the Lectionary Gospel reading for the day. I had started planning on John 14:15-21, the verses immediately succeeding last Sunday's lesson, and was planning to say some things about how the Holy Spirit's presence with us now is to do the same things that Jesus did in his earthly ministry, and how our love for Jesus can be measured by our obedience.

All good, sound stuff, I'm sure you'd agree. But then my thoughts were totally hijacked on Thursday evening. I was attending electronically a webinar. For those of you who don't know what a webinar is, it's a seminar on the world wide web. This webinar was convened by a Canadian Christian network called the Forge Canada². The aim was to reflect on the question, 'What do we want to take with us?' Not, you understand, 'take with us' when we leave this life, but 'take with us' from the experience of lockdown under COVID-19 and into whatever the new future looks like. Especially, what do we as church want to 'take with us'.

It made me think of a provocative article I'd read earlier that day. Those of you who listen to the Today show on Radio 4 may know the name of Elizabeth Oldfield, who sometimes gives Thought For The Day. She is the director of a Christian think tank called Theos, and she published a piece on a website called Unherd, in which she asked the important question, 'What do we mean by 'back to normal'?'³

In the article, she says how she is fed up with people talking about going back to normal, as if we should simply return to old habits when the pandemic has died down. She refers instead to the French word 'normalement', which doesn't mean 'normal' in the English sense of what is habitual, but more in the way we use our word 'normative'. There will be new norms in a somewhat changed society. Our task, she suggests, as we think about the future, is not to talk about going 'back to normal' but to imagine what it will be like instead to go 'forward to normal', to new hopes and possibilities.

Now why do I tell you about that when we've read about the disciples having their enormous catch of fish in John 21?

It's for this reason. When Simon Peter says, 'I'm going fishing' in verse 3, he is trying to go 'back to normal', to what he'd always understood about life before meeting Jesus. The disciples are operating here in a strange and uncertain period. Jesus has risen from the dead, but they don't know what the future holds. So at this point Simon Peter defaults to the old familiar ways.⁴

There is a name for this state that the disciples are in. When we are in a season of uncertainty, flux, fluidity, and with the unsettled feelings that go with it, the name is 'liminal'. We are in a liminal place, or a liminal space. The disciples were in a liminal space in John 21, and we are too in a different way with the coronavirus pandemic.

And just as Jesus meets the disciples in their liminal space, so he is capable of meeting us in our liminal space today.

Just as Simon Peter tried to return to normal, there is a lot of talk today about when we are going to return to normal as a society and as a church, as Elizabeth Oldfield recognised. But also, as she recognised, just going back to normal isn't necessarily the best thing to do after the crisis.

Sure, there will be things to do in terms of managing how we reopen church buildings, but the crisis should have made us ask some fundamental questions about how we practise our faith.

And so Jesus meets Simon Peter and the other six disciples who are present on this occasion. He meets them where they are, and he blesses them there – 153 fish! – but he won't leave them there. Had we read on in the chapter, we would have read the famous account of Jesus restoring Simon Peter after his three denials with three affirmations of love for his Lord, and giving him his new task of feeding the flock.

The disciples have this wonderful catch of fish when they follow Jesus' instruction. As one of the participants in the webinar I attended said, they have their best ever day at the office!⁵

But just when the disciples would want, as good fishermen, to be attending to their catch, Jesus diverts them. 'Come and have breakfast,' he says. He calls them to spend time with him.

And that's where we need to be right now. Not just planning a return to the good old days (as if they were good anyway – we were struggling!) and all the safe, familiar things we take comfort in because we're used to them. We need to spend time with Jesus mulling over with him in prayer and Bible reading how we go forward from here.

A week or so ago we celebrated the 75th anniversary of VE Day. Can you imagine if at the end of World War 2 people had said, right, let's just get back to the 1930s? It would have been ridiculous! And it would have been a poor choice of decade, with the Depression and so on. No! People knew then that a new world needed to be built.

And if the church is to be a prophetic voice after the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to be speaking and modelling what a new world looks like.

Oh, sure, we'll have to do some managerial tasks in how we bring our buildings back into use, but I hope that even in doing that we'll be willing to review exactly how we even use those premises. Surely something of the community spirit that has been engendered during lockdown speaks to us about where we need to concentrate our time? And I don't think it involves hiding away behind the walls of church buildings.

If you're a practising Christian watching this video, I want to challenge you to ask at least three questions of yourself and of others, in prayer, in Bible reading, and in conversation with other Christians.

Here are my three questions. You may have more questions, and indeed better ones. But try these for starters:

Firstly, what have we learned in this crisis?

Secondly, in the light of all that has happened – good as well as bad – what can we now imagine for our church and our community?

And thirdly and most importantly, what do we hear Jesus saying and see him doing?

Intercessions

Risen Lord, we pray that you will uphold all who are down.

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the world's poor and the unemployed,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the homeless and the refugee,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the war torn and the oppressed,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the depressed and the despairing,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the sinful and the sorrowful,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the sick and the suffering,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the diseased and the disgraced,

Lord, have mercy.

Upon the lonely and the dying,

Lord, have mercy.⁶

Our Father ...

Lord of all life and power, who through the mighty resurrection of your Son overcame the old order of sin and death to make all things new in him: grant that we, being dead to sin and alive to you in Jesus Christ may reign with him in glory; to whom with you and the Holy Spirit, be praise and honour, glory and might, now and in all eternity. Amen.⁷

Blessing

May you find in Christ Jesus, risen from the dead, a sure ground for your faith, a firm support for your hope, the assurance of sins forgiven, and life that is eternal⁸; and the blessing of God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be with you all, now and for ever. Amen.

¹ David Adam, *The Rhythm Of Life: Celtic Daily Prayer*; London: SPCK, 1996, p15f.

² <https://www.forgecanada.ca/>

³ <https://unherd.com/thepost/what-do-we-actually-mean-by-back-to-normal/>

⁴ I owe this insight to Karen Wilk of Forge Canada during the webinar.

⁵ I owe this insight and the next paragraph to Cam Roxburgh of Forge Canada, a man who used to live in Guildford and play football in Knaphill!

⁶ Adam, p16.

⁷ The Collect for Easter Day

⁸ Adam, p17.