

Dear Friends,

As I write we expect, subject to Parliament, to enter a second English lockdown. The detailed rules may differ from the first lockdown 2020, but the basics seem awfully familiar. Sadly, churches will not be able to hold public services. We may open for private prayer, and small support groups (e.g. for bereaved people) are permitted, subject to church council consent.

One thing that sounds different in the PM's speech is that people over 60 are now advised to take special care due to vulnerability caused by diminished immunity as a natural result of the aging process. This may give many church officers and members in the circuit pause for thought. It is one of life's little ironies that although the state pension age has increased for some people by 8 years, the age at which we are deemed to be vulnerable has dropped by 20 years.

In *Desiderata*, by Max Ehrmann (Copyright 1927), we are counselled to "Take kindly the counsel of the years, gracefully surrendering the things of youth". Of course, others like Dylan Thomas in 1937, have suggested that "Old age should burn and rave at close of day". I prefer Max Ehrmann's philosophy.

As the years go by, we continue to benefit from our reading in earlier years. Quotations come to mind, even though we may not always remember to whom they should be attributed. For example, years ago I read a wonderful story of a great preacher. Someone had approached him and said how wonderful it is that we mere mortals can address the omnipotent Creator of the universe in prayer. The preacher agreed but followed up with a question. Did the person know that there was something even more incredible than the fact that we can talk to our Creator in prayer? The amazing fact is that we *can* address God in prayer, but the most amazing mystery is that so often we *do not*!

The year to 31/08/21 has been designated as a year of prayer in the Methodist Church. There is no shortage of topics that we might pray for. There is much cause to simply be with God in silent, perhaps wordless, prayer and meditation, seeking God's strength. We can also use the words of leading Christians to guide our prayers. I find that good music of many genres inspires in me a sense of God's presence in a way that words alone may not achieve. Meditation on Scripture and the meaning of life can be a demanding process but also a rewarding one when accompanied with prayer. Of course, the Methodist Prayer Handbook contains a wealth of help for our prayer life.

If you were to achieve one thing from an improved prayer life, what would you like it to be? For myself, I would like an ever-closer awareness of the presence of God, especially within the mundane tasks and the everyday interactions with other people. Especially during the second lockdown, when many people will be feeling lonely, and others will be feeling fearful and very many are feeling depressed, the knowledge of God's presence with us and within us is surely one of the keys to Christian resilience and fortitude.

Some people value the instantaneous Damascus Road experience above all things. Others emphasise the painstaking walk along the Highway of Holiness with its spiritual disciplines and our practice of the means of grace. I see these two aspects as complementary rather than contradictory. Our spiritual journey must begin somewhere – let us call it conversion. But it must also go somewhere if it is not to be an empty flash in the pan – let us call that process sanctification. Part of the process of sanctification, or growing in holiness, is enduring hardship as disciples of Christ, with the spiritual armour that He provides. In the difficult times our faith is purified like silver in the smelter's fire. Faith, hope, and love are our essential and sufficient virtues to help us through a testing time whilst still growing in the awareness of God's presence.

In 1684 John Bunyan wrote a stirring hymn recalling Hebrews 11:13 "...and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." It was the school hymn of my secondary school. It is also listed as one of the nation's favourite hymns and it may serve us well during the second lockdown.

He who would valiant be gainst all disaster,  
Let him in constancy follow the master,  
There's no discouragement shall make him once relent  
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Since Lord thou dost defend us with Thy Spirit  
We know we at the end shall life inherit  
Then fancies flee away, I'll care not what men say,  
I'll labour night and day to be a pilgrim.

God bless you,

Keith

Keith Beckingham, Superintendent minister.