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Back to normal?

Last week the Arthur Rank Centre passed what we hope will turn out to be a bit of a COVID milestone, with a return to in-person training!

Other signs of a return to 'normal' have been spotted by those football fans amongst us who have been enjoying England, Scotland and Wales' performances at Euro 2020 (or have been enjoying shouting at the telly in frustration). We've been struck by the impact of the return of crowds to football matches: the noise, the sense of community and celebration (or lament!).

Of course, the danger of doing something so 'normal' can lure us into a false sense of security around COVID. But the postponement of the lifting of restrictions - announced in England last week and in Scotland earlier today - the steady increase in COVID infection rates, the 'final' push on the vaccine rollout, plus news from the UK government of planning for an autumn booster campaign, should leave us in no doubt that things are a long way from being back to 'normal'.

As we, our churches and our communities continue to navigate our way through this pandemic, let's continue to be mindful of the huge range of practical, emotional and spiritual responses that will be evident around us.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Hope, confidence and courage

Bible Readings

Mark 6:45-52

Immediately Jesus made his disciples get into the boat and go on ahead of him to Bethsaida on the other side of the lake, while he sent the crowd away. After leaving them, he went up on a mountainside to pray.

Later that night, the boat was in the middle of the lake, while Jesus was alone on land. He saw the disciples straining at the oars, because the wind was against them. Shortly before dawn he went out to them, walking on the lake. He was about to pass by them, but when they saw him walking on the lake, they thought he was a ghost. They cried out: they all saw him and were terrified.

Immediately he spoke to them and said, 'Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid.' Then he climbed into the boat with them, and the wind died down. They were completely amazed, for they had not understood the real meaning of the feeding of the five thousand: their minds could not grasp it.

Psalm 119:113-116

I hate double-minded people,
but I love your law.

You are my refuge and my shield;
I have put my hope in your word.

Away from me, you evildoers,
that I may keep the commands of my God!

Sustain me, my God, according to your promise, and I will live;
do not let my hopes be dashed.

Reflection

I've just returned from a mid-week communion service in a nearby village, held once a month by the Mothers' Union, though everyone is welcome. During carefully social-distanced coffee afterwards, conversation turned to when and how churches were opening. Most people were from one of two neighbouring groups of churches. One consisted of two villages, which had 6-7 services each Sunday in their two churches; they have 6 ordained clergy (several of whom have retired from full-time ministry) and 'a whole lot' of licensed lay leaders. The other benefice has 7 churches in 6 villages whose two clergy are struggling to manage one Sunday service a month in each of the four larger churches and an occasional extra service in the others. Discussion covered a range of feelings and reflections on the current situation:

- Gratitude for what has been offered to sustain and nourish spiritual life and discipleship.
- Delight in having mastered Zoom and the benefits of online services in various formats, especially for those who have found it difficult to get to a physical meeting, some for many years, rather than just over the last 18 months.
- Concern for those who have been excluded by the inability to access online services for a whole range of reasons.
- Difficulties in making sure that everyone is included in communications when these are again almost entirely electronic. (Interestingly, the two more active churches seemed to have handled this less well than their neighbours ...)
- Joy at being able to meet physically for communion again, but...
- Acknowledgement that some people may never return to church buildings, perhaps because they have just got out of the habit or have lost confidence in going out or meeting other people.
- Anxiety about loss of singing voices from the prolonged restrictions on singing in churches or choirs.
- Frustration that family and village events planned for the end of the month have had to be postponed or cancelled (yet again in some instances).
- And, in this group, huge relief that weddings of their friends can still go ahead.

I'm sure that similar conversations and feelings will be shared by village churches of all denominations around the country!

So, what insights can we gain from the readings set for today? The Mothers' Union theme for the year is 'Rebuilding hope and confidence' and there is definitely encouragement for us to do this, both in the verses from Psalm 119 and in the story from Mark's Gospel.

The Psalmist speaks of God as his refuge and shield. 'I have put my hope in your word,' he comments. Through spending time studying what God says in his word, he has come to love God's commands and promises as he finds in them a counter-balance to the world in which he lives. Evil-doers and double-minded people are still around us today; you only need to listen to the news or read the papers to be reminded of this! The remedy remains the same: to focus on God, to have confidence in his presence and promises and to hold onto a vision of hope. 'Hope is love stretched into the future,' says the Croatian theologian Miroslav Volf.

Mark's gospel is full of urgency and sprinkled with 'and then ... at once ... immediately'. There are two instances of this in the few verses above. It is an action-packed chapter, in which Jesus is rejected at Nazareth, sends out the disciples, learns about the death of John the Baptist and welcomes the disciples back with their stories about what they had seen and done in his name. And all this before the feeding of the five thousand! There have been plenty of good things – the disciples have gained confidence in sharing the good news, people have been taught, fed and healed, crowds have come to hear Jesus – but there has also been rejection, grief and death. No wonder Jesus felt the need to spend time alone in prayer.

Meanwhile the disciples were exhausted, in the middle of the lake, in the dark, straining at the oars, with the wind beating against them, and not understanding what they had seen and heard. There are resonances here with the conversations over coffee about the good things that have happened, anxieties about the future, levels of exhaustion, and a desire to discern what God is saying for the future of our churches and villages, through things we don't fully understand, and that may even cause us to fear.

'Take courage,' says Jesus. 'Do not be afraid.' His presence makes the difference.

Be brave, be bold. Hold on to hope, stretch love into the future and trust God to sustain you.

Prayer

God of all times and places, we long for freedom from the constraints of this virus,
bring us to a place of patience, we pray;
we long to go about our lives without fear,
bring us to a place of confidence, we pray;
we long to sing your praises in churches full of welcome,
bring us to a place of safety, we pray;
we long for a world in which vaccines are available for all,
bring us to a place of justice, we pray.
And so may we find healing and health in the goodness of your grace. Amen.

(From the Diocese of Southwark's Discipleship News)

Response

Do you know someone who has been 'holding the light' for others over this last difficult year, and is coming to the end of their own strength? If so, you might like to use this prayer for them; perhaps use your creativity to turn it into a card to give to them:

A Prayer for you as you hold the light
May you find the strength and resolve
To continue in the face of all that is being asked of you.
When you've done your best and given everything you can,
May you be assured that this is all that could have been required.
When you are confronted by the unreasonableness of some
May you constantly be reminded that many others appreciate your endeavours more than words can say.
When messages of hope and comfort rare required of you
May you be granted the words and wisdom that you need.
When you feel broken and drained,
May you be held fast in the midst of your struggle.
And when you simply cannot respond to all the needs that confront you,
May your mind dwell on what you have accomplished and not what you had to leave undone.
So may you find the peace and stillness of heart
To rest and recover when your labours subside.
And may our prayers and concern
Be as unrelenting as the demands that you are facing.

(Prayer from the NW Baptist Association / Industrial Christian Fellowship)

Ann Wright, Secretary, Churches Together in England Churches Rural Group