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Nearly back to normal?

As COVID-19 restrictions continue to lift, many of us will be experiencing a level of freedom that we've not had since before Christmas. Indeed, with the exception of Christmas Day, those of us living in Leicester haven't been able to gather together indoors since last June!

For those of us who have received both our COVID jabs – or even just the one – and who live in areas of Britain with low case rates, there may be a real sense of opportunity and an excitement about the possibility of getting out and about.

But others may well be feeling anxious about the risks inherent in greater contact with others, the pressure of having to say 'yes' to invitations to gather or the proximity of areas with increasing COVID rates and the presences of new variants.

As you spent time in your community over the next few days, listen well. What is the mood? What are people excited or anxious about? How might you and your church family respond to new local opportunities and challenges?

Whatever this week looks like for you, go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

louise.davis@arthurrankcentre.org.uk

Better times ahead

Bible readings

Psalms 115

Ezra 9:5-15

John 16:16-24

'A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me.' Then some of his disciples said to one another, 'What does he mean by saying to us, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"; and "Because I am going to the Father"?' They said, 'What does he mean by this "a little while"? We do not know what he is talking about.' Jesus knew that they wanted to ask him, so he said to them, 'Are you discussing among yourselves what I meant when I said, "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me"? Very truly, I tell you, you will weep and mourn, but the world will rejoice; you will have pain, but your pain will turn into joy. When a woman is in labour, she has pain, because

her hour has come. But when her child is born, she no longer remembers the anguish because of the joy of having brought a human being into the world. So you have pain now; but I will see you again, and your hearts will rejoice, and no one will take your joy from you. On that day you will ask nothing of me.^[a] Very truly, I tell you, if you ask anything of the Father in my name, he will give it to you.^[b] Until now you have not asked for anything in my name. Ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be complete.

On the face of it, three completely different scenarios.

Ezra is on a guilt trip on behalf of Israel, convinced that the experience of conquest and exile is all the result of apostasy. Psalm 115 pokes fun at idol-worshippers. Jesus, in John's Gospel, puzzles his disciples by predicting his departure, followed by greater joy and security in God's love.

Underlying each passage is an experience of loss, confusion, disorientation, and a trial of faith. Frightening and bewildering circumstances have engulfed the faithful, or (in the case of Jesus' disciples) they are about to.

The Israelites of Ezra's time had been conquered, invaded and forcibly removed from their homeland. When the longed-for return to Jerusalem finally happened, reconstructing their society was harder and more controversial than they had expected. Psalm 115 is only too aware that when people enjoy all the freedom in the world to live and worship as they choose, they will be tempted not only by idols of silver and gold, but also by influential voices pouring scorn on their beliefs. As if warning his disciples against complacency, Jesus describes a testing time of anguish, bereavement and sorrow soon to come, with a rather vague promise of happiness thereafter. Drawing on the image of labour and childbirth is not, as we might imagine, to trivialize the experience: pain, anxiety and uncertainty attended childbirth with tragic frequency, making a safe delivery an all the more heartfelt cause for rejoicing.

So how do we learn the lessons of a difficult time?

Like the exiles returning to Jerusalem, our rural communities are, like the rest of society, emerging into a need to re-think how we live as community. We have become painfully aware of inequality. The scars of loss, ill-health and poverty remain for many. We are freshly aware of the value and fragility of the natural world. Our work, our worship, perhaps even our faith, have been turned upside-down by the unnerving events of the past year.

Jesus reassures us, along with his disciples, that there is hope and comfort ahead; but the new life to which Jesus rises and call us to follow will not be the same as the old one. It calls us to seek new priorities, not old idols; and in shaping our future, to place all our faith and courage in the living God, whose promise is to be with us through whatever lies ahead.

Prayer

God of newness and renewal, lead us, and those we live, work and worship alongside in our rural communities, into the future with a new understanding of how we can live our lives in harmony and

compassion with one another and with the earth, and above all in the constant presence and guiding power of our loving Creator. Amen.

Response

- What are you particularly thankful for as we emerge into post-pandemic life?
- Can you think of one change you would like to hold on to, and how you might do that?

We have just had elections at local or national level (depending on where we live in the UK), but that's not our only chance to influence political priorities. If you don't already know, find out who your local representatives are, and send them a message of support and encouragement to re-think their priorities in this new environment.

Canon Carol Wardman, Bishops' Adviser for Church and Society, Church in Wales