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Yesterday and today and forever

With the UK government's announcement that all legal COVID-19 restrictions will be lifted on Monday 19 July in England, we are clearly moving into yet another new phase of life with COVID.

However you, your family, your church and your community are feeling about the announcement, we can hold on - as we have done so many times over the last seventeen months - to the reminder in the book of Hebrews that 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever' (13:8).

We at the Arthur Rank Centre - and all our Together Apart partners - will continue to support, encourage, equip and resource rural Christians through the pandemic and beyond. **However, today we are announcing that we have collectively taken the decision to send the final Together Apart email on Tuesday 20 July.** We took this decision around Easter time this year, when the lifting of restrictions was still 'pencilled in' for 21 June; our timing was predicated on the end of the academic year and was not designed to coincide with a government decision.

Thank you for coming on this journey with us over the last seventeen months! There have been enormously difficult times and times of real blessing. We've heard amazing stories of how God has been at work in rural communities and their churches. We count it as the most enormous privilege to have been able to navigate this really challenging time alongside you.

Go well!

Louise, on behalf of the Arthur Rank Centre team

Discerning God's direction

Bible reading: John 7:1-9

The Unbelief of Jesus' Brothers

After this Jesus went about in Galilee. He did not wish to go about in Judea because the Jews were looking for an opportunity to kill him. Now the Jewish festival of Booths[b] was near. So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea so that your disciples also may see the works you are doing; for no one who wants[c] to be widely known acts in secret. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' (For not even his brothers believed in him.) Jesus said to them, 'My time has not yet come, but your time is always here. The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify against it that its works are evil. Go to the festival yourselves. I am not going to this festival, for my time has not yet fully come.' After saying this, he remained in Galilee.

Reflection

Jesus had just had a row with the Jews, and many people who had thought he was 'someone special' after the feeding of five thousand people had deserted him. He was still in Galilee, being pressured by his brothers to 'put his money where his mouth is'. Jesus was very clear about what action he was taking, and why.

I was lucky enough to travel on pilgrimage to the Holy Land a few years ago. We started in busy bustling Jerusalem, and then travelled down through Jericho to Galilee. I clearly recall the sense of release as we left the city and travelled to open countryside.

I wonder how much strength and encouragement Jesus was getting by staying in the rural space of Galilee. There is the lake, with its calmness and wildness, with mists and clear vistas to the other side. There are hills, some gentle, some rising with sharp scree almost vertically. There are olive groves and crops. Jesus chose to stay there, rather than engage with the people thronging the narrow streets of Jerusalem, which I found to be full of nervous excitement and energy. Jerusalem has been contested space ever since it was founded. The rural/urban divide is perhaps no new thing. There will always be people who are energised by the hustle and bustle of people in cities, and those who are refreshed by very different space of the countryside.

In this passage, Jesus resisted the call to travel from Galilee to Jerusalem. The call came not from God but from his brothers, perhaps as a challenge or even a dare. Jesus declines to travel with them for the festival, saying that his time has not yet come.

Time is a tricky thing. I have been self-isolating for the last few days, and there are times which drag. Friends who are out and about in the world assure me that time is racing by. Even as COVID-19 infection rates soar, the UK government has announced that all legal restrictions will end in England on 19 July as we 'learn to live with the virus'.

What I hear is at odds with my experience, and it's hard to know what to trust. Jesus too was facing a collision of what his brothers thought and what his heavenly Father wanted. Should he leave the countryside and travel to the city? Was now the right time? Were the reasons good?

Jesus' answer was to wait. He stayed where he was, in Galilee, away from the busy city, perhaps to the displeasure of his brothers.

We are all facing our own conflicting calls now. Each of us has views on interactions with others as COVID-19 variants continue to circulate. Some of us are desperate for time with our families, friends, colleagues, fellow sports fans and churches. Some of us are very nervous indeed. Increasingly we will have to make and justify our own decisions. The answer may not be 'Jesus waited and so will I'; rather, Jesus discerned the call of God the Father on his life and acted accordingly. The result made no sense to his brothers, but by following his Father's will, Jesus did the right thing.

This is the task that lies before us: to discern God's will for ourselves, whilst remembering that the answer for me may not be the answer for someone else. It's going to get complicated, and perhaps easy to pass judgment on others for the choices they make.

This is where today's passage can help. The answer lies in discerning God's call on our lives.

Prayer

Loving God,

Help me, as I face choices each day,

To seek your will and do your bidding.

When I see the choices made by others

Let me be filled with kindness and compassion.

May I remember that judgment is yours, not mine.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

Response

Set aside some time to think about something you want to do in the coming weeks and months. Consider prayerfully what the joys and difficulties might be. As you work your way through the possibilities and options, pray for those who would make choices differently from you. Ask for God's guidance to show you the right way and time for you, and ask for compassion for those who choose differently.