

Birth Pangs (May 2024)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

So here we are. My 48th and final (at present) article for the Fellowship Matters magazine. I'm not about to spend the time reminiscing about times past, and the ways that these articles have given me the opportunity to add my voice to the church's many conversations over the past nearly nine years. However, I am going to briefly take the time to thank everyone who has contributed to the writing and production of the magazine throughout my tenure. Thank you to everyone who has contributed something to these pages, in whatever form it has taken and about whatever subject has been written. Particular thanks are also due to Rita and Janet, who continue to compile and edit each issue, coaxing articles out of people, always encouraging and graciously flexible when it comes to deadlines. My grateful thanks for their continuing ministry in this way. Please support them by saying "yes" and putting pen to paper (finger to keyboard) in the future...

As for me, the only way that I can realistically finish my written ministry here is to provide you with a reflection for the current time. The span of this magazine takes us through the few weeks remaining before Ascension, Pentecost and the anticipation of summer, with its attendant flash flooding, flies and hosepipe bans (particularly during Wimbledon fortnight). During this time, we will have our fair share of opportunities to curse the weather for being either too hot or too cold, we will find reasons to be cheerful and disheartened at the various sporting events that pepper the late spring/summer calendar, and we will start to enjoy the first fruits of gardens and allotments that will soon be awash with salad leaves, courgettes and other tasty treats. And in the midst of all that, we will once again celebrate the birthday of the church as it was established in the upper room in Jerusalem a mere 10 days after Jesus ascended into heaven.

Let's just for a moment put ourselves into that upper room, sitting alongside the disciples and the other followers of Jesus who we understand from Luke's writing in Acts numbered around 150. Picture yourself as one of those unnamed people, present at the day of Pentecost.

Imagine your thoughts as you arrive. You will have had to travel across the city to get in, maybe wary of those in soldier's uniforms as much as your fellow Jew, remembering that it was only a few short weeks ago that the crowd cried out "Crucify him", less than a week after they clamoured for him to be declared their messiah. But you make it to the secret meeting place, away from prying eyes and amongst friends.

How long have you been a follower of Jesus? Are you one of those who heard his teaching in the Temple, when he fearlessly confronted the Pharisees and challenged the prescribed order of religiosity and rules, instead preaching of a third way, a way of peace and grace in the face of violence and restrictions? Or are you one of those who saw Lazarus emerge from his tomb, his resuscitated breath forcing its way out of the tightly woven bandages around his head? Or have you been with Jesus for longer, one of those who were there on a hillside being fed with a portion of five loaves and two fishes, and having heard stories of runaway sheep, errant sons and violent attacks on the road to Jericho?

However long your association with Jesus, and with those gathering now in the upper room, you are united in prayer and waiting. Waiting for the promised Holy Spirit, a few days after the long-promised Saviour disappeared from view. What keeps you going during this time of waiting? Is it the company of others, those who have shared in these remarkable days, their testimony of healing and restoration sustaining you during the silence from heaven?

Ten days may not sound a long time, after all they say that a week is a long time in politics, but Jesus

didn't give a time limit when he left. The Psalmist wrote that a thousand years is as a day to the Almighty, so maybe there will be a bit longer to wait than anticipated.

John and Peter, James and Andrew, now gaining in confidence since their encounters with the resurrected Jesus on the beach, leading the prayers of the faithful as you look around the faces of your fellow pilgrims. What are the prayers that are offered? Surely there will be prayers for safety, for the threat of death will not have diminished just because the cockerel crowed three times. There will also be prayers for healing, for those who are dying and for the families of those who have died. There are too many of you to make such prayers unlikely during this less than sanitary time in earth's history. So much for prayers for the present situation that you all find yourselves in.

But what of prayers for the future? Do you dare ask for the Holy Spirit to get a move on and make its presence felt sooner rather than later? Do you ask for a change in the hearts of the authorities, both religious and military, to become more accommodating to the followers of the man they could not silence? Do you pray for a better, brighter tomorrow? Or do you still fear what might happen to you when you leave later in the day?

Or do you just sit in silence, lost in the memories of the life you left behind to join with those who answered the call of "Follow me"?

Paul, your soon to be mortal enemy will later in his post-Damascene fervour encourage all believers in Jesus to pray continuously, giving thanks whatever the circumstances, so maybe it's a chance to simply say thank you for being where you are, for the people you are with, for what you have seen, heard and experienced since you made your choice.

Whatever the future may hold, you can't be robbed of your past. And just for the moment you can appreciate the time you are spending with like-minded people, many with still unanswered questions, doubts and certainly plenty of fears. But also the reassurance that you are not alone. The promise is yet to be realised, but when the Holy Spirit does finally come, in who knows what way and through who knows what method and with who knows what effect, this will yet again vindicate you in your decision to back Jesus. You may well have been one to have deserted Him on the road to the cross, but your presence in the room hints of your rekindled commitment now.

It is because of His grace that you are in that room. It will be by His grace that you and your fellow pilgrims will carry the good news into the world when the Holy Spirit finally arrives, facing whatever response you receive. God's grace that was sufficient for you previously will continue to be sufficient for you and all those to whom you bear witness of all that Jesus means to you.

And God's sufficient grace is what continues to be offered to us today as we are challenged to live lives that bear the same good news message as those who sat waiting in that upper room. It is God's grace that sustains us when we face the darkness and celebrates with us in the light. Although we cannot predict the future, we can be confident in God and His grace, at all times and in all places.

Go in peace, love and especially in grace.

Food, Glorious Food (February 2024)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

Churches traditionally spend the time between Christmas and Easter focussing their preaching on the life and ministry of Jesus. Focus is usually on themes such as his baptism and presentation at the Temple, the temptation by Satan, the calling of the disciples and various of his many miracles and teachings. All this in the attempt to show the world that significant events took place in the 30+ years between the cradle and the cross.

However, this year's calendar doesn't allow much time for this as it feels like we have only just finished the annual wrestle of returning the Christmas decorations to the loft and we're already moving into Lent. We may still have leftover cheese in the fridge, or some eaten treats lurking in the dark recesses of the freezer, but the supermarkets segued smoothly from mince pies to hot cross buns^[1], from selection boxes to mini eggs before 2023 had finally ended. In response, the Rt Revd Rachel Treweek, Bishop of Gloucester, called out two of the big supermarkets for such a rapid move, reminding them that Christmas at least lasts until Epiphany.

And supermarkets who realised that there is another opportunity to sell chocolates and cards found yet more room for Valentine's Day treats while people were still buying last-minute Christmas presents. However, even these heart-shaped chocolate boxes and heart-bearing bunnies will be fully overwhelmed by their Easter counterparts once February 15th dawns.

This year you can eschew the supermarkets' offerings and celebrate Valentine's Day with leftover pancakes from the previous day's Shrove Tuesday dinner. For those who usually abstain from chocolate during Lent, it may be therefore easier to relinquish that last Rolo to your nearest and dearest (unless they also join you on that fast). Even better news for chocoholics who will keenly feel its absence through the 6 long Lenten weeks is that as Easter falls on the last day of March, even those last few Christmas chocolates should still be in date when you crack open that first egg. Though if you need help removing such temptation from your life, your minister is willing to offer a self-sacrificial disposal service for you...

Food will continue to mark our journey to Easter, and not just in its ovoid chocolate conclusion. Whether you are like me and try to keep your consumption of hot cross buns to the latter stages of Lent or have to celebrate Easter Sunday lunch with roast lamb (with or without mint sauce) or have some other culinary tradition that you adhere to, there is one meal that remains central to the Easter story. I refer to Communion, the Last Supper, the Eucharist, the Breaking of Bread.

A simple meal, usually of bread and wine, that features in church services across the world wherever they can gather safely. Globally celebrated anything from annually to every time people meet for worship, our own pattern has us hold communion services twice a month, once in the morning as part of the regular service and once in the evening in a service with the meal as its sole focus. The words of invitation, the people who share the meal, even the type of bread that is broken may be different, but the event we all remember and the person who instituted it remain the same.

For those of you who joined us during the COVID pandemic, we continued sharing in communion together over Zoom, using anything from biscuits and tea to cake and port as representatives of the bread and wine. From the safety of our own homes we still met, remembered and joined in the meal at Jesus's invitation. Back in the church building as we have been for a while now, we still meet, remember and join in.

Stepping carefully into controversial territory for a moment, it grieves me that the one meal that should unite the entire global community of the Christian church is still one that divides us. Because there are divergent understandings of what happens to the bread and wine, and there are different rules governing who can do what in the service, we cannot come together as Jesus prayed on that first occasion to “be one” (John 17:21). Not that I’m suggesting that the way that we do things in the Baptist world is the one to which all others should conform. I just wish there was a way that we could find a way to join together as Jesus hoped.

That sojourn into an appeal for ecumenical unity aside, Communion at Clare Baptist Church takes centre stage on Maundy Thursday evening as we meet in the church building, and again on Easter Sunday morning both in the Country Park at 7:00 and then later during our Easter Morning Celebration Service. Three occasions where we will remember that Jesus died once and for all. Three occasions when all are welcome to respond to the invitation of Jesus to take, eat and drink.

But, of course, those aren’t the only occasions when you will be eating and drinking over the coming weeks. Even taking into account those people we’ve already mentioned who eschew chocolate during Lent, there are still plenty of opportunities to eat and drink, usually around 3 times a day as standard. Some of these may well be with friends and family. Some of these may be with other Christians – we will be having a shared lunch during February to prove it.

We often use Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth as part of our Communion services. 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 is a particular favourite passage. However, the context of this was Paul berating the believers in that young church for the way that they treated each other at mealtimes. The church, being made up of a mix of social classes, had some among their number who didn’t need to work and could afford long, lavish, idle meals. Others, the working classes, would arrive later, with their own meagre supplies, and yet others came with nothing. Rather than operate a “Bring and Share” policy, so beloved by churches nowadays, there was a definite divide between the “haves” and the “have nots”.

Paul’s point is two-fold. Firstly, no one should go without, and I’m glad to say that usually the problem at the church here in Clare is one of excess, rather than paucity. Secondly, and the point that is largely missed, is that Communion is part and parcel of every shared meal. Whether or not we take the time to explicitly go through the actions of Jesus of “Take, Eat, Drink”, we all do that naturally when we come together to eat and drink.

So maybe our ecumenical problem isn’t such a big one. If we understand Communion as also happening every time we gather together as a Christian community and “Take, Eat, Drink”, then we can also include those occasions when we do that at the invitation of others, and by inviting others to join us for any meal. Whenever and wherever that may be.

[\[1\]](#) Though, in reality, hot cross buns are increasingly available all year, which seems a bit of a pity.

[For The Byrds...\(November 2023\)](#)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

The change to a tri-monthly magazine presents some interesting opportunities for me as I contemplate this article. For example, the edition you now clutch tightly in your hand (or are browsing on screen for the online version) covers the period that includes fireworks and Remembrance, through the anticipation of Advent and the celebration of Christmas, past the end of 2023 and the conclusion of the first twelfth of 2024. A lot to cram in to a few words, you might say.

And, you'd be right, but then I reflect on the way that this demonstrates quite ably the feeling that our weeks go past like days, the months like weeks, and the years like months. It hardly feels two minutes ago that we were singing "Auld Lang Syne" and enjoying watching the televised firework displays over the Thames (other ways of marking the New Year are available), and we're already bemoaning that fact that we've been able to buy Christmas decorations for at least a month. 2023 has galloped by with the pace of a thoroughbred.

Of course, this is not true for everyone. For some, it will feel like each day lasts a week, each week a month, etc, and they can't wait for 2023 to bid us a final farewell in the hope that next year they, like Del Boy regularly reassured Rodney, "will be millionaires." Or at least will be dealt a better year than this one.

There is a chance, for those of us who are in the "blink and you miss it" camp of time passing, that there's no opportunity to take stock before the next Big Event is upon us. We scarcely seem to draw breath once we pack away our summer swimmies before we're wading through the fallen leaves of impending winter. And it can all get very confusing, particularly for those of us who always seem to be planning ahead. Fortunately, being a good Baptist, I'm not an adherent to the full ecclesiastical calendar, so don't need to know that the 20th November is the day we commemorate the death of local legend and 9th century king of the east, Edmund. Equally, I'm not going to get myself tied up in knots knowing which colour is right for which season, either in my choice of jumper or altar cloth. So far, so nonconformist.

However, this may be an encouragement for you to pause while reading this and allow yourself a moment to take stock of 2023. What were the high points for you? The low points? The middling bits? What stood out for you most and why?

Think of those who you shared the year with; those who were there at the beginning, those who you've met on the way and those who won't be there as you reach the end of 2023. This may be a moment that brings a bit of emotion to the fore, but don't worry about that. This is the time not to wallow, but rather to recognise the people who have shared our journey with us.

Once you've taken the appropriate amount of time to reflect and ruminate on the last year, please read on...

Space in my brain has been taken up recently on two aspects of God's character that we encounter through the Bible, and are backed up by experience (my own, though you may also agree with this). The Psalmists encourage us on a number of occasions to "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Psalm 106, 107, 118 [twice], 136). All 150 Psalms are full of experiences, both good and bad, and on occasion lament the seeming absence of God (or at least evidence of his presence). And yet, these particular Psalms speak very much of God being good (even if the times the writers were living in were not) and that his love endures forever (even if people showed an alarming lack of it).

Add to this the words of Ecclesiastes 3, where the unnamed writer reminds us that there "is a time for everything and a season for every activity under the heavens" before going on to list a number of contrasting examples. In the 60s, these verses were set to music by The Byrds, and many people of a certain age will not be able to resist the opportunity to start singing "Turn, turn, turn" now. Whilst enjoying this moment of musical nostalgia, I suggest that a pattern emerges as we put those parts of the Bible together.

The list in Ecclesiastes reminds us that events happen in life, some of which are under our control, but an awful lot of them happen to us without our invitation or initiation. The Psalmist reminds us that throughout all of life's experiences we are to give thanks to God for his enduring love, even when life has thrown us more than our fair share of rotten eggs.

As a church family we have recently been spending time in the letters of John. Written by someone who had either spent an appreciable time with Jesus as his self-proclaimed beloved disciple (if you believe some scholars), or by someone well acquainted with that apostle (if you believe others), the underlying messages of the letters are nonetheless straightforward:

- God is love and light;
- God takes sin seriously and offers sufficient grace to those who admit they need it;
- God, in the person of Jesus, is our companion and advocate;
- God is love and light (in case we hadn't realised it the first time).

It is the Holy Spirit accompanying us that demonstrates these attributes best; as we have gone through all that life has given us through 2023, we have been joined on that journey with the Holy Spirit, and hopefully as we look back we will see how he has demonstrated his love and light, his sufficient grace, his company and advocacy and more of his love and light.

Later in this magazine you will read a creative imagining of an event that must have happened in the Bible, though it has been missed up 'til now. However, as I finish this article, the last one of 2023 and the first one of 2024, go with a reminder of these ancient words:

"Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever."

Lessons In Life (August 2023)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

I like to think of myself as having been a fairly normal child. Normal, that is, within the broad parameters of normality that most of us would probably subscribe to. If you accept that, and even better if you yourself would have classed yourself as normal as well, then you will probably recognise something of the disheartening sensation that accompanied normal children like me when seeing, on the first day of the summer holiday, when six weeks of academia-less life stretched before me like a vast empty page, signs in the shops advertising "Back to School".

There is nothing more guaranteed to send a young heart plunging to the soles of their shoes than the realisation that the freedom of the Summer Holidays wasn't eternal, that the reality of a new school timetable would bite in only a few short weeks, and the promise of endless days would be shown to be the stuff of imaginations as August morphs into September and the leaves start to turn.

Of course, for the parent, who, when faced with the prospect of their offspring no longer under the scrutiny of the classroom for these six weeks, may blanch at the thought of all the shenanigans that could

be undertaken during this extended bout of home leave, these shop signs offer a glimmer of hope, that in a few short weeks the school gates will clang shut and their lives will once again be child-free between the hours of 9:00am and 3:00pm (or thereabouts). Alternatively, for the parent who positively enjoys the experiences that these six weeks can offer and relishes the chance to be more of a family together, their feelings on spotting such a sign may well mirror those of their child.

For the teacher, these signs might also be greeted with emotions akin to their young charges. In my (admittedly limited) experience of people in the teaching profession, I have yet to encounter one for whom the sight of the "Back to School" sign elicits a whoop of unbridled joy. I imagine a dragging of the feet, a lowering of the head and a desire to rip up said sign to be more the response of the teachers who pass by. But I might be wrong.

Bringing us bang up to date, I was somewhat disquieted to see my first "Back to School" sign in the last few days, a clear week before the local schools have even started their summer holidays. No longer with the intention of bringing the already holidaying child and teacher back down to earth with a bump, the portent of academic doom was posted even before the final school bell had rung. My compassionate side felt for those poor souls who wouldn't want to be reminded of the presence of that particular sword of Damocles hanging over them. My less empathetic side was grateful to no longer be part of that world.

But it also made me think about what the message of the sign "Back to School" is meant to convey. The intent of the shops is to lure in parents who want to be prepared when September arrives. It says that a bit of planning is helpful, and the temptation of becoming distracted by too much holiday enjoyment should be tempered by the drudgery of buying new shoes and geometry sets. And, judging by the queues that form in the various shoe shops during August, people pay heed to these signs.

The message behind the sign isn't primarily to spoil a child's holiday (nor a teacher's one), but rather to remind parents that the future is set for them and there's no stopping the march towards the new academic year. If you can't beat them, join them (or at least buy enough shirts to see you through the worst of it).

However, it also made me think about the messages that are conveyed by the church. What is the message that people receive when they see, not just the posters and occasional inspirational quote on the notice boards, but the very name "Church" that adorn so many of our buildings and form part of most of our names.

Church - what does this name convey to people beyond the community of the church? Does it, like "Back to School" for children and teachers, fill people with dread and fear, associated with unhappiness? Or, like me as I walk past that shop sign with nothing but memories of being both child and uniform-buying parent, a slight twinge that once it was relevant, but no longer. Or, like so many who have no children within their daily lives, total indifference, a name meaningful to someone else but not to them. Or, like parents, a place for them to prepare for the future, an eternal queue for new school shoes, as it were.

The Church, in many ways, has an image problem that is far beyond the scope of this short magazine article to even attempt to begin to address. It is seen as a place of misery, and that's mostly a self-inflicted wound following years of not following in the footsteps and image of its founder. It's seen as a place no longer relevant to today's world or people, which may in part be a charge laid at the doors of the media and the portrayal of church in TV and film, but also in some of more arcane traditions that we still hold onto, such as meeting on Sunday mornings when there are car boot sales and football practices to attend.

And worst of all, it's seen as a place that has no place in people's lives. We've not helped in that impression, as it seems that we spend a lot of time trying to answer questions that no-one is asking (and falling out over these questions as well), and getting ourselves tied up in knots trying to raise enough money to keep our buildings open, even though fewer and fewer people are coming through the doors.

So, what do we do about the name and the problems associated with it? Let's go back to the world of retail to give us a clue. Shops could be more positive in their signs. Instead of "Back to School", how about "New Term, New Start!" as an alternative slogan? Rather than a sense of returning to the old ways, this is a way of looking forward, of turning the page and finding a fresh clean sheet on which the new school year can be written. Yesterday is gone, let's look to tomorrow. For children dreading the end of the holidays, it reminds them that there is something about to begin. And, if they wait long enough, the term will also end, heralding the start of another holiday. Beginnings followed by endings; endings followed by beginnings; beginnings followed by endings. And always something new just around the corner.

So far, so good for any budding shop sign writers out there. But what about the church?

Is there a case to be made to do away with the name "Church" and replace it with something more meaningful, or less weighed down by the baggage of the past and present. Would a name like "Community" or "Family" be more appropriate to what we are intending to be? Personally, I like the idea of being on a pilgrimage, exploring what it means to share life and faith together, but "Clare Baptist Pilgrims" makes us sound like a football team from the lowest of leagues.

Or maybe because we're limited on time and space, we just have to leave things as they are. Just like shops haven't come up with anything better than "Back to School" after all these years, and, let's face it, advertisers and slogan writers are paid far more than your average church minister, why worry about the name that's seen us through the last nearly 2,000 years of chequered history? Instead, let's spend our time working out who we are, what we do, and who and what we do it for and let the name sort itself out. And, if we need some inspiration or a better understanding of what it means to be the church that Jesus calls us to be, we might want to open the New Testament and reread the gospels and Acts. Our own "Back to School", only with the best teacher the world has ever known and some very interesting classmates.

Crowning Achievements (May 2023)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

On Saturday the 6th of May this year, the coronation of King Charles III will take place in Westminster Abbey, officially announcing to the world the handover that occurred in the immediate aftermath of the Queen's death last September. A seamless transition of the crown from one head of state to the next will be marked with much pomp and pageantry, with procession and proclamation. Downplayed in many ways in accordance with our new monarch's wishes, but still a series of occasions that few of us would dream of putting on, let alone being invited to attend.

Compare and contrast that, if you please, with the 6th of April, a mere calendar month previous, where Christians across the world will be remembering a ceremony of a very different sort, though one that also involved a king. This date is, for this year at least, the day in Holy Week known as Maundy Thursday; the day when members of the global church remember Jesus, the king who rode a donkey into Jerusalem, sitting in humble surroundings with his best friends to celebrate the Passover meal.

Our new monarch will be surrounded by the great and good of the world; invited guests, family and friends, all there to see and be seen at this momentous occasion. Jesus surrounded himself with those who had faithfully travelled with him through his peripatetic ministry, from the hill country of Galilee to the

crowded city that would condemn him to the death of a criminal.

There will be pledges of allegiance to King Charles, declarations of loyalty and service from the very highest to the very least. There was the kiss of betrayal for Jesus, the three-time denial of his closest friend, and the abandonment of the rest at the first sight of a Roman sword.

People will arrive at the coronation in limos and private jets, the transportation of choice for those on whom the cameras of the world will be turned. Dusty feet, soiled by the roads of town and country, show that Jesus and his disciples had no such recourse to comfort and luxury. The donkey and its foal will have been returned, their owners no doubt delighted at the publicity their beasts will have afforded them.

This is not to say that we should in any way compare our newly crowned King Charles III to Jesus, either for good or ill. Though they both have their followers and detractors, and both are well known for saying controversial things, it would be unfair in the extreme to draw too many parallels with a man whose destiny was set at birth with one whose destiny was set millennia before his earthly birth in Bethlehem. It is just a comment on the juxtaposition of the two dates, one month apart, and yet worlds apart in content and significance.

Jesus wore his crown lightly. In fact, as we continue fewer than 24 hours on from Maundy Thursday, we see Jesus having a thorny crown forced upon his brow. No reverential placing here – a thrusting Roman hand and jeering onlookers crowned Jesus, yet another ironic symbol that hides the truth of Jesus' real status. And then, when his hands and feet had been nailed to the cross, the sign was placed above his head, declaring to all that Jesus was "The King of the Jews." Another attempt at Roman sarcasm, an insult that actually didn't go far enough – Jesus is far more than the King of one group; he is the King of all.

Even so, on the previous evening, Jesus had shown his disciples (and those who have read of the account over the centuries since) of what true royalty looks like: in kneeling and washing the travel-weary and road-soiled feet of his friends. The Servant King, as we sing in church, who continued to show the way in both word and deed, even to those who would turn against him.

Those of us who wish to will gather in the evening to mark this occasion with a simple Communion Service, held at the church here. In this service, we will remember Jesus as he instituted the Last Supper, the meal at the heart of our faith, welcoming all to participate as Jesus welcomes us to join in. Reminded that at the table in that Upper Room sat Peter, who would deny him, Judas, who would betray him, and all the others who would abandon him. Sinners (and saints) – we will eat and drink to remember.

Other church communities will include foot washing into their service, others will have different ways of remembering and inviting. One church that I am familiar with offer a pamper evening for the women of the local community – foot washing re-imagined in manicures and pedicures. Acts of service that mirror the actions of the King we follow.

King Charles III will be the king for the foreseeable future – unless he decides to hand the crown on to William, his reign will last for as long as he lives. Jesus, on the other hand, has already gone through the experience of death. He has conquered death, risen again, and, as we will remember in the middle of May, ascended into heaven. For us, those who wish to be known as "little Christs" (the literal translation of "Christian"), how do we show that we follow him? How can we better resemble the Servant King in word and in deed? And not just on Maundy Thursday.

[Spoilers! \(February 2023\)](#)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

I was slightly taken aback recently when watching, with Vicky, an edition of the BBC television show “Between The Covers” and one of the guests confessed (if that’s the right word) that they always read the last page of any book prior to starting it. Not the blurb on the back, but the actual final page of the text.

Now, like me, you might be surprised by this revelation, having previously been unaware that someone could have such flagrant disregard to the linear nature of reading. Or you might be one of them as well, and don’t know what the fuss is all about. At least you will know whether the end justifies the commitment of getting there by toiling through the intervening pages of text.

Well, the fuss, since you put it that way, is in spoiling any surprises at the end of the story. What is the point, you might ask, of reading all about a gripping murder mystery if you already know that the butler did it? What price the sting in the tail, the unexpected denouement when it can be anticipated before we can expect anything else? Surely something is lost by knowing the end of the story even before you’ve met the first character, or appreciated the sweat and toil of the author’s efforts to come up with the perfect opening sentence.

But surely we’re as guilty in church of a similar thing, as we move once again through the calendar of familiar stories and readings that pepper our Sunday services. The vast majority of us know that the announcement of the birth of Christ will result in the shepherds’ visit to Bethlehem and the presentation of the gifts, without considering seriously the possibility of still-birth or any number of pregnancy-related risks that all expectant parents spend sleepless nights worrying about. And, at times, experience the pain and trauma of these coming true. But we are annually reassured that Mary did indeed give birth, because from the beginning of the story we know the end.

This is also true of this time of year. Accelerating through Jesus’ largely unrecorded childhood and early adulthood, through his earthly ministry, to join him on his journey to the cross, we are rapidly approaching Lent as this edition of the magazine is published. But even as we will shortly be spending time reflecting on Jesus’ triumphant entry into Jerusalem, institution of communion at the Last Supper and subsequent betrayal by Judas, those of us familiar with the Easter story know that the pain of crucifixion will be supplanted by the glory of resurrection just a few short days later.

So, just stop a moment and consider. In one way, we are forced to stop and take stock, because this magazine’s lifespan only covers us to the days leading up to Palm Sunday. It will be left to the next edition of Fellowship Matters to cover the period up to and beyond Easter Sunday. Therefore, by keeping to the boundaries set by this, let’s pretend that we don’t know what happens next (or read ahead in the Gospels to find out) and enter the world of “now” as the disciples would have seen it.

On the road towards Jerusalem, they would have known that they would be facing huge challenges ahead. Jesus had already caused consternation with the various healings that he had been performing over the years (read about those in all four Gospels). It had really come to a head over the raising of Lazarus from the dead (read all about that in John 11), an event that took place only a few miles from the city that Jesus and his friends were now heading.

Jerusalem, the city that stood for what was both the best and worst of life at the time. The centre of worship to YAHWEH (the Hebrew God – a good thing) but also a place of corruption, menace and threat from both Jewish puppet leaders and their Roman overloads (a bad thing). Jerusalem, once the great

capital and seat of the legendary King David, now seen as a bit of an embarrassment, a faded jewel in someone else's crown.

Into this uncertain future walks Jesus and his permanently bewildered followers. Each of them have their own story to tell: of redemption and second chances, of transformation and forgiveness, of fishing and tax collecting in the past. Each of them have stories yet to be told, of betrayal and desertion, of denial and restoration, but these are yet to happen.

Today, they are on the road. Today, they will stop and eat. Today, they will continue to ask questions of Jesus and themselves. Today, they will walk towards Jerusalem. We may know what happens next, but they don't. Yet.

And what about you? What have you done so far today? Who have you met with, eaten with, walked with (literally or metaphorically)? You know no more of what tomorrow will bring than the disciples did on their way to Jerusalem.

But, like them, you do have Jesus, who knows, as an Old Testament prophet once said, "the end from the beginning" (Isaiah 46:10). We have someone who walks with us, asking us questions of ourselves and of himself, committed to us on our way into the uncertainty of the future. Turn each page with him...

Message In A Stable (December 2022)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

It's been quite a second half to the year! Back in June when I wrote my last article prior to my sabbatical, the subject was the Queen and her (as then) forthcoming Platinum Jubilee celebrations. Who would have predicted that we would finish the year with a new person on the throne? King Charles III will address the nation on Christmas Day, the first time a different monarch's voice will be heard at 3pm since 1951. We'll have to familiarise ourselves with The King's Speech from now on, and for the next two generations at least, his message setting a seal on this momentous year as we look forward to 2023.

There were also changes at the top of government, prompted in no small measure by messages from different, some may say unexpected, sources. It has been widely reported that the keynote speech made at the Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast in early July by Rev Les Isaac, the founder of Street Pastors, prompted several senior government officials to review their loyalty to Boris Johnson's Premiership. Mass resignations citing a lack of morals at the highest level were soon followed by the search for a new Party leader and Prime Minister. And it was largely because of the messages contained in September's mini-Budget that led to Liz Truss claiming her place in history as the shortest serving Prime Minister that this country has had.

In each example here, and every other time as well, messages mean more than the content alone. It's the context and the consequence of the messages that matter.

It's been said that in recent years, the Queen's speech has made more explicit her adherence to the Christian faith that underpinned so much of her reign. Behind the words was the conviction that in the message of Christ, not just in his birth but also in his ministry, death and resurrection, the head of this nation and Commonwealth found her purpose and calling. It's no surprise that it was her grace, humility

and service that was spoken of so frequently in the days following her death, hallmarks of the Christ-like life that she vowed to uphold on her accession. The context of her faith, articulated in the content of her Christmas messages, were consequentially demonstrated throughout her long reign.

We also saw the context, content and consequence of messages that came from our government as indicators of where they stood and, U-turns aside, still stand. The context of the growing number of scandals that surrounded the Johnson Premiership and even the lack of consequences therein all contributed to the very clear message that was given not just by Rev Isaac, but also by all those who made their feelings known as resignation letter after resignation letter were released to the press over those few days back in July.

Later, in September, no sooner had the dust begun to settle, than the shocks of the mini-Budget were felt across the nation. It was, frankly, shameful that in the context of national austerity that the very bankers who only 13 years ago had contributed to send this country into a downward financial spiral were seeing their bonuses uncapped. The fears of more freefalling markets as the nation's finances could be undermined by the risk-taking of the banking sector is one that still lie in the shadows. For all the goodwill messages that have come out of Westminster, the rise of the reliance on foodbanks, the squeeze on middle-income families, the increased numbers of people having to choose between essentials belie the words. What does the context, content and consequence of all this do to us, those who are affected in so many ways by the messages from our government?

As Christmas approaches, we hear so many messages. It is interesting that many of the supermarkets and stores are amending their marketing campaigns around the context of austerity. They may be changing their content, but their aim is the same: they hope that the consequence of their adverts is to make you shop with them over their rivals. And, as we once again revisit the Christmas story, we are reminded how context and consequence, not just content, was crucial in how events unfolded 2,000 years ago:

The words of an angel visiting the temple gave hope to a childless older woman and her disbelieving husband, resulting in the birth of the last in the line of prophets who will point people to their long-awaited Messiah. The words of the prophets found their fulfilment in the message given to a young, unmarried woman, who accepted the invitation to give birth to God-on-earth.

The words of a distant Emperor's decree meant that the Messiah was born in the town of his step-ancestor, the greatest King that ancient Israel had known. The hillside song of the angels sent the excluded hired hands to be the first to be welcomed into the story of salvation. The words of the king's advisers guided the visiting mystics to the house of the young Messiah, whilst also sealing the gruesome fate of so many other local children. And, later in the story, the words of two old temple residents confirmed the baby to be the Saviour and foretold of the future that he faced.

The context, content and consequences of Christmas still resonate loudly today. What will resonate most for you this Christmas? It could be the Good News announced by the angel to the shepherds: "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." You may need to hear and receive God's peace and freedom from fear, or to hear that there is good news to be heard, or that Jesus is indeed for you. He's on your side, your Saviour, the same as he was to those shepherds.

The world may not seem to have changed that much in the intervening 2,000 or so years. People still have the capacity to be as bad as they've always been, just with more creative and terrible ways to demonstrate it. But each one can be changed by the Holy Spirit, the gift that lasts far longer than any wrapped present under the tree.

After all, God's message at Christmas is one of transformation. The transformation of a teenage girl into the mother of the long-awaited Messiah. The transformation of the ashamed and the excluded into hope

and inclusion. The transformation of the foreign pagans into humble worshippers of the one true God. The transformation of a broken world into one with a way of salvation. And all because of God, his love, grace and mercy, as revealed in a baby in first century Bethlehem and found through the Holy Spirit today.

Now that's a message we can get behind.

Time On Our Hands (October 2022)

May 30, 2024

by Elsa Day

I went upstairs to get ready for my daughter's arrival. Opening the cupboard door to find a pair of shoes I wanted for a little later in the day, I realised that most of them were summer shoes. I needed to do to my shoes what I had done with my summer clothes – put them away until next spring/summer.

It took me quite a while, not because I had that many but because I keep them in boxes and each one had to be explored. Of course then, a while later, after looking through the boxes containing my winter shoes there was only just time for me to put a pair on and rush off to keep an appointment. I was caught out; the appointment took much longer than expected. While I was waiting I thought of all the things I should have been doing and my frustration grew.

Never mind, as our daughter wasn't arriving until late evening, so I just time enough to do most of the tasks.

As we turned the corner into our part of Hertford road, a strange car was sitting in the drive. Yes, you have guessed; unexpectedly, our daughter had arrived early! As I pondered on the wasted time, the distractions when I could have done the things that I had planned, I thought, how easy it is for me to get distracted from the important by trivial.

Maybe it is just me. Wasted time, putting off what needs to be done. Getting priorities skewed. Prayer times, Bible reading, writing that card or letter, telephoning... (yes, I'm no use at messaging using my 'phone. I have to admit it isn't just down to old age either, so often things that I haven't reviewed for ages suddenly take on the importance of something that just has to be explored.

Distractions that are unimportant. Afterwards I recognise these as not being part of God's plan. How easily the Enemy susses my weakness; how subtle he is as he works in my life. Yet I know that if I offer my time to the Lord no matter how busy the day ahead with a prayer, a time to read His word, a time to be with Him, then my time seems to stretch, my mind becomes focussed, stuff happens in perfect order, my priorities become so clear and all gets done.

You can tell that this is not 'me' but all of Him. So why doesn't this happen every day? Why does my focus get so flawed? I don't think I need to say more, but maybe if you recognise a weakness in yourself, may I suggest that you seek His help for it is then that we are made strong.

A Very Royal Family (June 2022)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

We're getting closer to the summer. The sound of leather on willow as the Great British Raindance gets into full swing across the country; the satisfying "thwack" of another mosquito thwarted on its quest to irritate the dozing watcher; the yell of pain as the gardener overstretchs in their quest for a fresh lettuce for lunch; the smell of strawberries and cream as yet another Wimbledon passes by in white-clad glory; the slightly gritty taste of sand-dusted ice creams at the beach. All herald the delights of the summer that is arriving at some haste.

With an April largely devoid of its eponymous showers, and a May with only one Bank Holiday, this year is already shaping up to be something unusual. Of course, the reason for the single Bank Holiday gives the month of June a uniqueness of its own; we've never had a monarch reign over this country for 70 years. Only France and Thailand can boast kings with longer tenures on the throne, and they may yet be overtaken in the coming years (months even).

Looking through the Old Testament, with Israel and Judah working their way through any number of monarchs, even the best that they can come up with is 55 years of King Manasseh (King David, the most famous of them, only lasted 40 years before being succeeded by his son, Solomon). Granted, most of them "did evil in the eyes of the Lord", so were doomed from the outset, or ran into opposition from invading hordes or offspring who thought that they could do better.

So, our Queen's reign is one of note, irrespective of our view of the monarchy. Whether we think that she is a bastion of all that is good and great about our nation, or that she is just a good egg, or that she is a relic of an Empire that long ago breathed its last, there is no denying her longevity and resilience. Photos of her sitting isolated and alone at the funeral of her beloved Prince Philip at the height of the lockdowns last year may have been hijacked for political point scoring, but it gave us all a glimpse of her humanity, her vulnerability, and her integrity. Equally, her previous Christmas broadcasts, such as the infamous "annus horribilis" speech of 1992, when she should have been lauding her 40th year on the throne, gave us a glimpse under the crown, as it were, at the person below.

What is also laudable is her constant Christian faith. Latterly coming to the fore in her annual festive speeches, the Queen often cites Jesus as the example to follow, or the ways that her faith has sustained her. For someone who has never lacked for any material thing, her need for a Saviour shows that the gospel is for all, not just the badly off. There is room within God's family for royalty, as well as the poor.

So, whether you are putting up your bunting and have already got your Union flag temporary tattoo in anticipation of the 3rd of June, or can't quite see what the fuss is all about and would rather wait for the 5th of November, the message is the same: there is room in the family of God for royalist and republican. Whether you are facing the current cost of living crisis with trepidation or nonchalance; whether you are wondering if the current war in Ukraine is the appetiser for a coming apocalypse or an opportunity to show that welcoming strangers into our homes is a demonstration of prayer in action; or whether you are incensed or ambivalent about the events in Downing Street during the pandemic, there is room in God's family for you as well.

John writes the following prayer to seven Asian churches at the start of the book of Revelation. Those of us who (in the same way as the Queen) proclaim the name of Jesus can include ourselves in this prayer, even though it was written nearly two thousand years ago. We know who the real ruler is.

Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, ... , and from Jesus Christ, who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father – to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

Vive La Revolution! (April 2022)

May 30, 2024

by Rev Paul Graham

I'm not exactly a "dedicated follower of fashion", as the old song goes. In fact, usually a good indicator of whatever is fashionable is to see what I'm not wearing, doing or following. Take, for example, my usual attire of corduroy trousers; not the *haute couture* of your average on-trend minister of religion. And I don't have a tattoo, which seems to be a requirement for ordained ministry these days.

However, there is one bandwagon that I have happily climbed aboard, and that is the revival of the record player. Partly as it harks back to my childhood when, as a child of the 70s, I remember fondly the joy of playing a 78rpm single at a shudderingly sonorous and soporific 16rpm (we had a record player that old!). Equal fun was had in cranking the knob the other way, and hearing the accelerated strains of records a la Pinky and Perky. Oh, things that you can't do with CDs, let alone easily with MP3s!

But, yes, I have joined the vinyl resurgence, and it was with great happiness that I received my Christmas present of a new record player, complete with counter-balance, pitch control and solid metal platter (there's nothing more satisfyingly nerdy than writing that last sentence, believe me).

And then it comes to the records themselves. I hesitate to say this, but I'm not really that interested in buying new records. Not from new artists, at least. I'm not going that far in my band wagoning. By and large, it's down to price. New records by current artists retail at something to the tune of twice, or even thrice, the price of the CD version. I'm happy for those recordings that are created digitally to be recreated digitally on CD – I don't need the hiss of the record to accompany these modern tracks.

However, I do love an old record. There is something about the joy of the gatefold sleeve that really impresses me! Whether it is an album (or single) from my youth, kept all these years for such a time as this, or rescued from a charity shop at a bargain price, sometimes with the original price tag still showing how much someone somewhere will have paid. And when you can pick up an absolute bargain, it makes it doubly satisfying.

And, in this season of Lent and the run-up to Easter, I have a special quest. One of my Easter traditions, aside from hot cross buns and chocolate eggs, is to spend time on Good Friday with the musical "Jesus Christ Superstar". You can blame my parents for this; it has been a family tradition for as long as I can recall. Whereas recently I have been sitting down to watch one of the filmed interpretations, I am now on the lookout for the double-album of my youth. Featuring many of the voices from both the original West End production and the first filmed version, this is for me so much more than just a record. It's a set of memories of times and places, even of people, long gone. For me, listening to songs like "I don't know how to love him" and "Gethsemane" is more than just an aural experience; it's an emotional one as well.

It's also a spiritual experience, because it is a reminder of the humanity of Jesus as he walked the earth

approximately 2,000 years ago, and of the divinity of Jesus as he surrendered to the traitor's kiss and was nailed to cross. In those few songs, we meet Jesus in bread and wine, in the marketplace and temple, in weakness and strength. In words that are for me some of the most powerful committed to music, Jesus says to Simon the Zealot after being encouraged to start violent opposition against the Roman authorities:

*Neither you, Simon,
Nor the fifty thousand,
Nor the Romans, nor the Jews,
Nor Judas, nor the twelve
Nor the priests, nor the scribes,
Nor doomed Jerusalem itself
Understand what power is,
Understand what glory is,
Understand at all,
Understand at all.**

In words that seem to transcend the screen or speaker, we are invited to glimpse into the space that Jesus inhabited on earth: all the greatness of the Godhead at his fingertips, and yet limiting himself to the community that he surrounded himself with and the humanity that he embodied. As Judas later sings, Jesus could have been the global superstar in his lifetime, but he left that particular task to his disciples.

For those of us who have followed the Easter story at least from Palm Sunday, we will know that at the Last Supper Jesus reminded the disciples of their history and heritage of the Passover; of the sacrificial lamb that was killed so that their ancestors could find freedom. At the same time, Jesus reframes the story to include all humanity, centred on his imminent crucifixion.

That reminder of old to new, of reframing history to shape not only the present but also the future, is present throughout Jesus' ministry, but finds its strongest impact during those few days; from Thursday evening to Sunday morning, we see how the past freedom is remembered, reformed, reshaped, redeemed and released from a limited number of recipients to an invitation to the whole world.

Just as the records I play remind me of times that I cannot return to, but send me into a future that is yet to come (and the anticipation of further bargain purchases), so too we approach Easter with its reminders of the past traditions, and the hope of the future yet to be written (or sung about). As revolutions go, I think Jesus and his humanity-encompassing, grace-filled, love-fuelled, hope-inspiring, mercy-giving, justice-chasing quest is one bandwagon worth boarding.

** Lyrics quoted from "Poor Jerusalem" ("Jesus Christ Superstar" by Tim Rice & Andrew Lloyd-Webber, 1970)*