

May 2020 – Letter to the Vale of Stour Churches

Isaiah 58:8 (New English Translation) Then your light will shine like the sunrise; your restoration will quickly arrive; your godly behaviour will go before you, and the Lord's splendour will be your rear guard.



Dear Sisters and Brothers,
During the prayer meeting I attended this morning, a very strong image of sunrise came to mind. There is that moment in the very early morning when darkness seems all around but something in the air feels different. It's as if our senses, in the heightened awareness of darkness, pick up the cues of a new dawn before the light appears over the horizon.

In what is commonly called Third Isaiah (Ch 56-66), we hear from a prophet living in Judah after the Babylonian exile. Life for those that have returned remains very harsh, they are surrounded by difficult circumstances and economic depression (sound familiar?). They cannot attend worship in the temple because it was destroyed (well ours are closed). And yet despite this, in Isaiah 66:1, there is a hint that work has begun on rebuilding the temple.

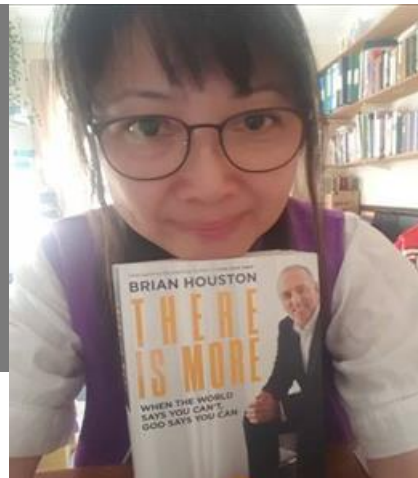
In the midst of this very challenging context, deliverance is promised through a commitment to repentance. Isaiah 58:8 depicts this in the language of the dawn. If we (re)turn to God, then not only will we be delivered and restored but our light and healing will shine forth to others. In response to this promise, God's chosen people begin to rebuild...

What a tremendous image. As we reflect in these Sundays up to Pentecost on 'what is church?', let us together stand and look for the dawn with the heightened senses that our current darkness offer us. And even before it has fully come, let us be ready, let us engage such that our 'godly behaviour' goes before us and knowing that God's splendour guards us...

May God bless you and keep you safe. **Rev Alan Combes**

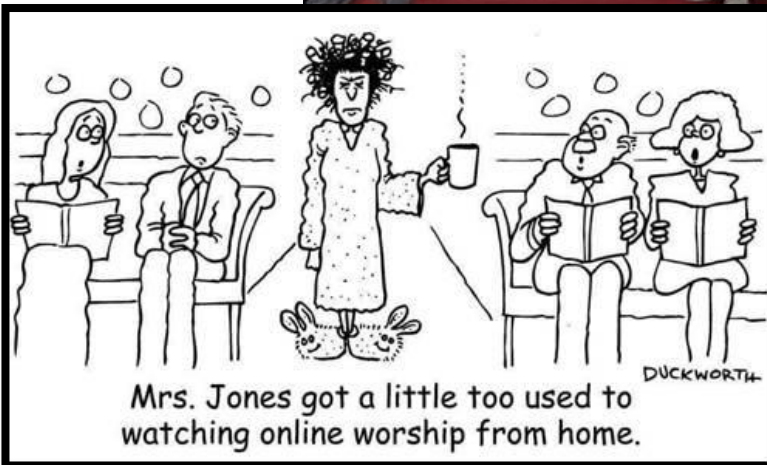
A Prayer: Gracious God thank you for the spiritual revival that is all around us. Thank you. that by your grace, goodness is emerging from tragedy. We pray that the dawn may come quickly now and in these coming weeks please guide us in how we might safely begin to welcome the first few rays of light across the horizon. But help us also to be patient and open to the prompting of your Holy Spirit. In the words of the Wild Goose community:

For those who have
lost track, today is
Blursday the
fortyteenth of
Maprilay.



Went to my first social
distancing Baptism
last Sunday...

NOTHING SHOULD GO
BACK TO 'NORMAL'.
NORMAL WASN'T
WORKING.
IF WE GO BACK TO
THE WAY THINGS
WERE,
WE WILL HAVE LOST
THE LESSON
MAY WE RISE UP
AND DO BETTER.



Mrs. Jones got a little too used to
watching online worship from home.

Early in the morning, in the multi-coloured company of your church on earth and in heaven, we celebrate your creation, your life, your death and resurrection, your interest in us. So we pray: Lord, bring new life where we are worn and tired, new love where we have turned hard-hearted, forgiveness where we feel hurt and where we have wounded others. And bring that joy and freedom of your Holy Spirit where we are the prisoners of ourselves.

To all and to each where regret is real, God pronounces pardon and grants us the right to begin again - in Jesus name. Thanks be to God Amen

News: There is much news to share as we continue in changing times...

The Sacred 10

With this letter you will receive a booklet prepared by Rev Josephine on the 10 commandments. We hope you are blessed by reflecting on this and Josephine will be running a fun quiz in due course! So watch out for details of this which will come out in due course...

The Opening of Churches and the Preaching Plan

Churches are to **remain closed at this time**. Worship may begin in July but this depends on the government and the Methodist Church. Social distancing will still be required and careful plans must be made by each church before safe opening can be assured. I have written to all churches on this basis.

The circuit leadership team is aware that a large number of our preachers are in the 'at risk' age category. Therefore, we will not immediately be able to provide preaching provision for all churches. So, whilst churches may open for people to gather for fellowship in a safe manner, services of worship will only happen in a restricted number of churches. Assuming we are allowed to open in July, a short preaching plan will be constructed to allow us time to see how things settle down. So please be patient with us and understand that we want what is best for everyone whilst remaining safe.

Reconnecting with our local Communities - a Mission Opportunity

In looking ahead, we invite you to think about how you might reconnect with your local community to let them know that you are there for them, praying for them and potentially open for them. **Recent Tear Fund research** has shown that many more people than usual have been seeking worship or exploring prayer (younger people especially) on-line. We are surrounded by spiritual revival as neighbour talks to neighbour and thousands of volunteers come forward to engage in community life.

So here is a key question for us all...

How many of our Methodist church websites and our newsletters have a clearly signposted reflection, testimony or a link to the most fundamental questions: What is a Christian? How do I become a Christian? OR What does it mean to live the Christian Life (in the midst of Covid 19)? This is a genuine mission opportunity for us to explore as details of what we can do become gradually clearer.

Labyrinth Thanksgiving and Remembrance

Some creative folk have suggested that churches might prepare a pathway through their church that includes a number of stations where people can pause to reflect, give thanks, to request prayer, to receive prayer and to remember those who they have lost. This is often called Labyrinth worship and would allow household groups to queue and quietly pass through our premises and be blessed in a safe manner.

Rev Ruth's Departure and Rev Helen Croft's Arrival

We are sad that a combination of COVID-19 and Ruth's ongoing illness means that a circuit church-based farewell service will not be possible in the short term. We are however exploring our options and wanted to assure you that Ruth is not forgotten. Despite the current challenges of moving it is planned that over the summer the Reverend Helen Croft will join us.

Everyday Life in Lockdown Project

Rev Josephine would like people to volunteer to send **selfies** taken of their everyday life since the lockdown (see example). She is keen for all ages, variety of interest and hobbies (eg supporting the local community/ reading/ cooking/ painting/ gardening/ drawing/knitting/ etc). These will be combined into a presentation for Pentecost Virtual Service, as well as forming part of Josephine's studies. You can send these to her via WhatsApp or email: to josephine.soon@methodist.org.uk

Please make sure any photos containing children are offered with permission.

THANK YOU to everyone who is working so hard on the phone, through paper and technology and especially through prayer. **THANK YOU** to those in our midst who are on the front line. We pray for you and for our local communities.

