

INTRODUCTION TO THE THEME 2020

A LEARNING PEOPLE IN A TIME OF CHANGE

Bible readings for 13 September, 2020

Exodus 14.19-31

Psalm 114

Romans 14.1-12

Matthew 18.21-35

Humour at its best has the capacity to make us smile whilst also making us think. One of the pinpricks of light over the difficult months of 2020 has been the proliferation of jokes and cartoons which have done both – lifting our spirits whilst pointing to a deeper truth. A cartoon which really struck me was that picturing a woman peering anxiously out from her doorway with the caption ‘...checks to see which chapter of Revelation we are living today...’

It is a truism to say that the events of 2020 have been extraordinary. It isn't just the international Covid-19 pandemic, although that is at the forefront of our minds. The weather has also been dramatic – even before the ‘hottest this’ and ‘wettest that’ there were the devastating winds of February half-term. Then, as the year has rolled on through lockdown, the extra-judicial death of one (more) black man in America has sparked world-wide protest and raised an awareness of the age-old scourge of racism in a way that rocks people's understanding of the stories on which their lives have so far been built. Stories and systems which have been years in the making need to be quickly unpicked.

Most people's experience of 2020 has been a bit of a roller-coaster, not all bad or good. For our children and young people this is also true and there is much for which they will want to give thanks. Over the last few months many have learned to ride a bike, play an instrument, train a puppy, crack their computer game. They can tell you their joys themselves. But there have also been dark moments. Statistics about the mental health of children through lockdown and the impact on safeguarding services are beginning to emerge. Some will have experienced bereavement. We know that not all youngsters have been able, or willing, to learn away from the resources and imperatives of the classroom. The social and relational aspects of education have largely gone by the board, from learning to share in the sandpit at nursery to sharing in learning in the seminar room in the university. They have struggled to be away, and they will struggle to be back.

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2020 also raises questions for the long-term. If you are 60, the percentage of your life spent in lockdown could be between half and one percent. It's manageable. But if you are 6, it is around 5 to 10%. The longer that the pandemic requires us to live restrictively, the greater the proportion of children's learning about life that will have been acquired in 'strange times' – other people, kept 2 metres away from; facial expressions, hidden behind masks; grandparents, unseen and unhugged. Then there are the long-term economic consequences of the pandemic – statistics show that youngsters who complete their education in a recession take around 20 years longer to reach the levels of economic stability of other generations. Their worries about jobs, housing and life's ordinary pleasures are compounded. The Black Lives Matter movement reminds us that, for some in our communities, these worries are an ongoing fact of life.

Does it have to be like this? The early days of the pandemic brought a sense that the world could embrace a better way of living – neighbours rushed to be, well, neighbourly and, as the roads emptied and the birds sang, the hashtag 'nature is healing' became popular. Reflecting on other tragedies in the year, social media became a place to #bekind. Yet, as things moved on, people rushed gladly back to fast travel, fast food and fast fashion. Being kind took its place alongside being stressed, angry, judgemental...human... We have not yet become the people we were made to be.

One impact of this remarkable year is seeing the Bible in a different way: familiar stories have taken on a different resonance. The drama of the plagues and disruption of the exodus/wilderness suddenly seems closer to our experience. Likewise in Romans we recognise the dilemmas of the early church – able to create something entirely new and better, yet still claimed by the traditions of the past. The unforgiving servant, like the people of God leaving Egypt, given the chance to wipe the slate clean but unable to take the opportunity to be new

How can we embrace change when we are anxious and struggling ourselves? But how else will we step out into the Kingdom if it is not by embracing the chance to be a learning people in a time of change? In our children and young people, and in education, there is both hope and opportunity.

This year's introduction was written by Barbara Easton, Vice-President of the Methodist Conference 2021/2022 and Head of Service, Methodist Academies and Schools Trust.

