

Thought for the day: 18–24 May 2020

by Maria Henriksson-Bell

Monday 18 May

When I was asked to write a few of these reflections, I hoped for peace and quiet to give the task the attention it deserved. Of course, with perfect timing, our neighbours' ceiling sprung some sort of leak.

This ceiling sits below a tiled rooftop terrace and the noise of workmen with power tools trying to access and repair the damage has been utterly infernal but, of course, the work needs doing urgently. There were dark clouds above threatening rain, which must have added to the sense of urgency.

After just one of the three days of repairs, I was exhausted from the noise and vibrations; it really was that loud, but it must have been ten times worse from the perspective of the two sets of neighbours affected, one looking down at a broken terrace, the other looking up at a hole in the ceiling. Exhausting! At least we were only dealing with noise and vibrations.

Life is often like that at the moment: Exhausting but probably worse for someone else.

It doesn't always work, this chirpy perspective. There are times when despair needs to be allowed to be just that, the darkness it is, with no platitudes of optimism. But, most days, in most situations, there is some kind of silver lining or some way of seeing the upside.

For those days when there doesn't seem to be an upside, we have at least the comfort of knowing we are not alone in suffering.

While there are situations you wouldn't wish on your worst enemy, there is still comfort to be had, then, in hearing, "Me, too, been there, done that, I know what that feels like. You are not alone".

God, through Christ among us, through the body of believers, through friends, family and carers, feels our suffering and hears our prayers. Whether we feel it or not, we are held and heard.

For those days of middling misery that aren't quite disasters but seem unmitigatedly chaotic and disappointing; for days when parenting goes to pot, work goes to pieces and tempers fray; when you stub your toe, get bitten by a rabbit and the bread won't rise; there's an excellent expression: character building.

"More than that, we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope." (Romans 5. 3-4)

May we be comforted.
May we feel held.
May we build character.
May we find hope.
Amen



Tuesday 19 May

When I was in pre-school we had to bring a piece of fruit to keep us going from breakfast to lunch.

Sometimes my mother gave me a passion fruit, the most unusual, super exotic thing in the fruit aisle, and it made me so happy because everybody else brought something sensible and frugal like a nice filling orange or banana, but my mummy bought me passionfruit.

The 'passion' in passionfruit is a reference to the passion, the suffering of Christ on the cross, as the early missionaries to Brazil found its flower a useful illustration of the five wounds of Christ.



We planted a passion-plant in the garden of our first, rented, house. It was a variety bred to cope with a European climate and made me laugh. Judging by its vigorous growth, that thing had expansionist plans for world domination.

Passionfruit in preschool. Top marks for eccentric effort, zero for sense and it still makes me happy. There's poetry there.

The lesson I took to heart throughout my childhood, in a multitude of ways, was that different is good. Unusual is good. Difference is not to be feared.

It has been easier said than done to approach the last few weeks in that spirit. To start with, it was thrilling to have so

much time on our hands, to see so much of each other and not need to travel etc. The novelty soon disintegrated, not unlike a bridal veil used to keep pests off the cabbage.

Tempers frayed, every household in the vicinity seemed to undertake DIY, niggling health conditions played up and, despite best efforts and experience in home education, we struggled. What has helped enormously, apart from binge watching old boxsets, prayer and the perspective of other people, has been remembering two things: 1. This too shall pass, and 2. How fortunate we are.

"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness." (James 1. 2)

Wednesday 20 May

"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." (1 Peter 4. 10)

*"Lord of all pots and pans and things,
since I've no time to be
a Saint by doing lovely things or
watching late with Thee,
or dreaming in the dawn light or
storming heaven's gates,
make me a saint by getting meals and
washing up the plates.*

*Although I must have Martha's hands,
I have a Mary mind
and when I black the boots and shoes,
Thy sandals, Lord I find.
I think of how they trod the earth
what time I scrub the floor.
Accept this meditation, Lord,
I haven't time for more.*

*Warm all the kitchen with Thy love
and light it with Thy peace.
Forgive me all my worrying and make
all grumbling cease.
Thou who didst love to give men food,
in room or by the sea,
accept this service that I do,
I do it unto Thee."*

(Poem by Klara Munkres)

Dear God, please read
above, it was all I could
muster.
Amen



Thursday 21 May

It was August the last time I visited the far north of Sweden where I grew up and still have family. That time of year it is paradise on Earth with a biodiversity that rivals the rainforests, a wealth of food to forage and a silence that settles densely in your ears broken by thousands and thousands of insects and birds.



Getting ready for leaving, I took time to look over the site of my first bit of environmental activism: a patch of meadow. When I was a child, a fastidious neighbour had been mowing the verges of his drive. To this day, I can't for the life of me think why, as they were beautiful and full of native flowers, butterflies and bees. It was slow work as the thick vegetation put up good resistance but, as he was nearing the bit that, to my mind, was common land, I couldn't stand it any longer.

This wanton destruction was eating me physically, hurting me like I were the harebell about to be sliced in half. There was at least one locally abundant, but nationally endangered, species there. I took a moment to walk away and think what needed doing. I don't remember if I asked any adults for help, I have a vague feeling I did and a vague feeling I was told, "It's his land, he can do what he wants."

I remember the rising panic and the whirring of the mower as I decided: Something had to be done and I was going to have to do it. I wasn't so much scared as nervously energised. I still

remember the adrenaline of, quite possibly, being in the right, the thrilling possibility of speaking up and being heard, but also the very real possibility of being cut down to size.

But, I kept walking as if something took hold of me and powered me, this was no longer my business, this was general business that needed dealing with, yet it went against so much convention. It was not 'the done thing' to defy an adult, let alone one I didn't know, and certainly not over what they did with their own land, but in my mind that strip of land wasn't just his, it belonged to something greater. Someone greater.

How could I make him see this? What was the principle at stake? I was only little but must have been at least instinctively aware of the need to appeal to something universal, not just my opinion, and opted for 'beauty' as the most common value and principle at stake. Everyone likes 'pretty' things.

I mustered up the courage to walk down, catch his attention and, with my most audible, authoritative voice, say: "Don't cut down the pretty flowers.". He was perplexed and stopped, but I can't remember a reply. I walked away, none the wiser as to whether I'd been heard.

Later, I overheard the adults approvingly retell the story as he had mentioned it to my grandparents. They were greatly amused. I worried greatly whether I was in trouble. I remembered feeling patronised and disappointed; the focus had turned to me, not the flowers saved and the principle of the matter. What was the point in that? Still, every year he made a point of leaving those flowers.

*"Let no one despise you for your youth, but set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity."
(1 Timothy 4. 12)*

Friday 22 May

My other half and I have, with no commute and new-found time in the morning, started the world-famous Couch to 5K running programme. I am pleased to have only just gotten off the couch, he is already at the 5K.

This new-found enthusiasm for exercise is, I am sure, highly unoriginal.

"Your body is a temple...", wrote St Paul. It is often taken to mean, "My body is a temple, I must keep it in good shape, clean and healthy."

There is, of course, some truth in this interpretation. A healthy body can support a healthy mind and a sound spirituality, though there is not always a correlation. Some of our most lucid, spiritually astute thoughts come to us in the adversity of ill health.

Sometimes it is interpreted as, "My body is a temple, I must dress and adorn it well." And, again, there is some truth to this. Some (not me!) are gifted in the creative art of applying make-up or putting together an attractive outfit. I have no doubt that God rejoices with us when we, as the creative beings we are, delight in playing with colours and shapes on our bodies.

Another reading of this passage is, "My body is a temple, already a temple and, therefore, already beautiful and worthy as it is." This, of course, chimes well with the wisdom of 1 Samuel 16. 7:

"...man looks on outward appearances but the Lord looks at the heart."

The larger truth St Paul is referencing is, of course, that actual temples, made of stone or wood, are not the only places where God is found; God dwells among us and in us. We live in a God-infused world and these were things the ancient Israelites wrestled with at times of exile.



We're not unlike the Israelites at the moment, locked out of our usual place of worship, but while we may long to meet in person, to sing, pray and take communion, we are learning that God is with us.

We are holy creatures. All of us.
We are beautiful. All of us.
And God dwells in us. All of us.

Messages have made the rounds on Twitter etc to the effect of: "If you haven't come out of lockdown with a new skill, you didn't lack time, you lacked discipline."

This is, of course, nonsense! For many, this has been a time of mere survival. Some handle the circumstances by needing to rest more, others by keeping more busy. Many are just as busy as always with their usual occupation, only now from home and with more people in the house. Many are profoundly lonely.

I happened upon these words and they struck me as universal: "We're not all in the same boat. We're in the same storm."

There is a huge difference.”

Christ, as we give thanks for good days, and good health, may we never be blind to any advantage or privilege.

Amen

Saturday 23 May

A prayer based on those I offered during our Sunday worship on 26 January:

Dear God,

Thank you for all that has been, the hard times and the easy.

We give thanks for all who have helped us through our ups and downs.

In the light of Eternity, we remember those no longer with us. Comfort those who mourn.

Looking ahead, we pray for the Holy Spirit to lead us each step of this year. We ask that we will always remember the way of Christ and let his way guide our every decision. Turn our hearts to deeply desire and work for justice and healing for this broken world.

We repent of all times when we have caused others to stumble and lose faith or made people think they are unwelcome in your Kingdom. Grant us the humility to always remember we worship and follow a servant king. May his ways be our ways as we minister to those in need, the poor and the unwell.

We hold in prayer those in deep need or crisis, known to us.

May we, as individuals and as a congregation, reach out especially to those who have been made to feel they are not welcome and those who fear they will not be welcome.

The writing by our church door reads:

"No one belongs here more than you

Following the example of Jesus, and seeking to model the inclusive love of God, we welcome all people whatever your status, wealth, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, age, health or mobility." As you have welcomed us, give us courage to live up to that unconditional welcome.



Jesus, you excluded no one. You looked for every sheep, comfort the many who have yet to find a flock or have left. Forgive us and heal us if we have played any part in hounding them out.

As we look forward to challenges, personal, national and political, we

pray for strength and courage. We pray especially for prophets of all ages, warning us of the dangers of climate change and inequality.

God, we ask for discernment, insight and the humility to listen to your voice, understand your will and mend our ways.

Give us endurance to stay the course as we seek solutions to environmental destruction and the current pandemic. If there are personal changes we need to make, help us do so cheerfully and not begrudgingly. We all have a part to play.

This world belongs to you, Lord. The soil is not ours to deplete. The air is not ours to poison. The water is not ours to pollute. We give thanks for those who have found good ways of farming that do not harm the planet.

Give us all a willingness to learn new habits, where we are able to.

As we look forward to spring, we give thanks for the little things that make life worth living; the sunshine, the flowers, the smile of a stranger. May your gifts of gratitude and joy flow freely through us so that you are honoured by our lives and others are drawn to you. Bless our endeavours and plans and all our projects and ideas so that they point towards you, Christ.

For the times when things are not easy, give us endurance. We pray you whisper in our ear when we need to run, and whisper in our hearts when we need to stand our ground. We pray for protection over our family, friends and ourselves.

Give us the courage to stand up for those who need us to amplify their voice. Help us, like the prophets of old, to call out injustice where we see it. Strengthen our resolve to challenge the systems and structures that trap people in poverty, that alienate the foreigner, that victimise the women and children who unfairly bear so much of the burden of war and inequality.

Give us courage to ask the difficult questions: What am I doing with my life? Who am I helping? Who am I harming?

May voices of truth, goodness and kindness grow louder and louder until they drown out the lies of darkness and greed. A

fairer world is possible. We are not doomed to keep up these cycles of poor getting poorer and rich getting richer.

Jesus, grant us eyes to see the world like you did when you walked this Earth. Holy Spirit set our hearts on fire for change, not for the sake of change but to herald the Kingdom of God.

Inspire us also to ask the questions that spark joy: What small thing makes me smile? Where is your Spirit already at work? For what thing today am I most grateful? What am I looking forward to?

We offer these prayers, trusting they are heard, trusting there are answers and trusting there is hope. For thine is the Kingdom, the power and the glory, forever and ever.
Amen

Sunday 24 May

Our father who art in heaven...

We give thanks for all those who have been like parents to us and all whom we are called to care for, young and old.

Hallowed be thy name...

Jesus, we pray for those who whisper your name in secret and those who boldly proclaim it while persecuted or in deepest need.

We pray in solidarity with all who are persecuted.

Thy kingdom come...

Bring not to reality our small dreams
but make real your plan for the world.

Holy Spirit, inspire us to dream and work with you.

Thy will be done, on Earth
as it is in heaven.

**Give us this day our
daily bread...**

We give thanks for all who
feed us, body and soul,
and repent of the times
when we have not shared
as we should, neglected to
tell of your grace.

Empower us to boldly share the gospel at all times, if
necessary using words.



**Forgive us our sins,
as we forgive those who sin against us.**

Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil...

God, you know our struggles, protect us from each other and
protect us from ourselves. When we are tempted to hate, let us
be peacemakers.

We hold also in prayer...

Those who have made the news headlines this week.

Those who have been brought to our attention through a
meeting or a conversation.

Those who are in hospital, in care or in a place which is strange
to them.

Those in whose family, marriage or close relationship there is
stress or a break-up.

Those who are waiting for a birth, or a death or news which will

affect their lives.

Those who need to forget the God they do not believe in. May they meet the God who believes in them.

Thank you for small mercies. Thank you for all glimpses of joy and thank you for the good times ahead, yet to be revealed.

We offer these prayers, trusting not in our own righteousness but in your nature, which is always to have mercy. We are your people and you are our God.

For thine is the kingdom, the power and glory for ever and ever.

Amen