

News Letter, January 2021

It is customary, in January, to wish people a Happy New Year - something difficult to say under the present third session of Lockdown conditions. An alternative greeting could be: "Every cloud has a silver lining, then wish for the hope, imagination and courage to find it.

We certainly need a better year in 2021 after all of the suffering endured by so many people infected by the Covid 19 virus - and now a third Lockdown. The need for extended, protective isolation, reports of increasing numbers of infections and deaths and, perhaps, having the pain and grief of losing a relative, friend or acquaintance can be a depressing debilitating experience.

But there is hope - there is always hope - and this comes in the form of a rapidly developed vaccine now being delivered, gradually to all people here in our country and around the world. The speed with which this remedy was produced is a great achievement for the many dedicated scientists, in the pharmaceutical industry, researching and developing an effective protection against this terrible disease. It is at times like this when the essential goodness and resourcefulness in human nature comes forward to 'save the day.'

While all of this was happening we had Brexit. Since formally leaving the European Union on the 31st, January this year the government have been negotiating a trade deal - agreed just in time for our 31st, December exit. In 2021 we now enter new uncharted waters in our relationship with Europe. During this year It will slowly come apparent as to how we are likely to prosper, as a nation, under these new trading conditions.

For us, at Guisborough United Reformed Church, it has been a long wait, now probably extended until March, before we are able to get back to worship in the church sanctuary. During the long closure, since the 15th, March last year, much work has been done in the building. The main heaters have been replaced with an updated system and the project to replace the pews with chairs has been completed. We had expected to open in November but the second Lockdown unfortunately extended the wait to reopen for worship.

The change from fixed pews to movable chairs gives us much more flexibility in how we are able to use the limited space available in our relatively small building. It is a first phase in our desire to offer facilities for outreach into the local community. All of this work has been done with the elders working in cooperation with the property committee.

In April Sharon became a tenant in the church flat. Her tenancy was a short one ending on 16th, November when, for family reasons, she left us to take up residency in Loftus. However, we were fortunate that our agent was able to acquire new tenants who took on the tenancy from 23rd, November. We hope that Jack and Katherine and their cat will stay with us for some time. It is also important to remember, at this time, that our old friend Ken Harris and his wife Margaret supported by Madge Baird, a Guisborough Church Elder, have produced online services and prayers for members and friends of the church since the Covid 19 restrictions were brought into force in March. This has been a big commitment to make for which we are most grateful. Keeping active the spiritual ministerial support, in the absence of services, is a crucial benefit for our church fellowship.



A view of the sanctuary with the change from pews to chairs

A Bible reading for Epiphany: Isaiah 60: 1 *Arise, Jerusalem and shine like the sun; the glory of the Lord is shining on you!*

This glorious, joyous verse of praise comes from a people returning from exile and being dispirited in finding their homeland in ruins. What do they do? So apt for the situation we find ourselves in today Take courage from this passage which is from verse 1 to 6.

Ray Tunnicliffe, Guisborough EC Group Magazine Coordinator.

THE BENEFITS OF LOCKDOWN

Every cloud has a silver lining, so the old saying claims - but is this true - and is it true about our faith in Christ in the absence of regular fellowship together in worship.

For ten weeks, after the Lockdown was announced in March, no regular communal Sunday worship was available. During that time I was able to follow the Scripture Union daily Bible readings in a more relaxed, reflective way. In the introduction to the April to June readings there was a reminder of the Union's 95

campaign that was brought to my attention some time ago. The 95 represents the percentage of children who have no connection with a church - a stark statistic for the future of faith today.

A short extract from the article well illustrates the extent of the problem.

"Ninety five percent of children and young people in England and Wales aren't in church. Of the 5% you are, many won't be encouraged or help to read the Bible. 60% of self-declared followers of the church admit they never read the Bible reported a Church of England survey in 2017. If I don't, their children probably won't. Knowledge of the Bible has not only dropped out of society in general, but even for many Christians, reading it is no longer a priority. But it's not all bad news through it's face-to-face and online work, Scripture union is discovering that the 95% usually aren't negative about Jesus and the Bible. They have few - if any - preconceptions. Often they're excited to know what is in the bible, and may well be more open to God than we think Church."

In Guisborough church we are well served by the teachers in our Junior Church, but the numbers of children are small and clearly reflect the situation nationally. Something to think about and - at this time of Epiphany - hope for a big revelation that may help find a practical remedy.

On the 2nd, August, restrictions were eased so that churches could open. With refurbishment of the Guisborough Church building unfinished and so still closed, this gave me the opportunity to visit other churches, which began with a visit to St Andrew's URC at Marton. Sitting in a large semi-circle, with all people present socially distanced, our old friend Jan Harper led us in worship. The sermon on this day was related to the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000 people. The main theme, which emerged, related to the story of a little girl who cried because she couldn't get into church because it was full. "We need a bigger church," explained the minister and so she set herself the task if raising money to do just that. She died before this was achieved but her efforts were rewarded later with the building of a large church and a hospital. A message here - that from small beginnings great things can come.

Although the Marton Church became my main port of call I did visit others. In brief they were:- *St Paulinus RC Church*. Here I needed to follow the regular litany as well as possible. The young priest, Father Phil, delivered an extemporaneous (without notes) homily based on a Gospel reading and a passage from Romans. He spoke about responsibility and taking this seriously - ,and how we may have difficulty in stand our ground on moral issues.

In *St Nicolas' Church* I was given a written guide to their regular litany, with the sermon being preached by the Rev. Alison Philipson. It was based in the story Jesus told in Matthew 21: Which is the son who obeyed his father? The son who said yes, but did nothing or the son who said

no, but changed his mind? The answer is obvious: action not words are needed by Christ and by God. A similar message can be found in the letter of James when he makes his famous quotation: "faith without works is dead." The Reverend Phillipson then went on to say that what we hear in church today is not a piece of light entertainment, some light relief from the concerns of the past week, but a call for action and must now be seriously viewed as such. At Great Ayton Methodist Church the preacher developed a theme based on the parable of the sower of the seed, as in Matthew 13. He was an elderly man, and an experience public speaker, whose message was similar to that of the Rev Phillipson - go out and do something for God and the Gospel. The service worked well with various members of the congregation taking part - so as Methodists - they have method - quiet efficiency.

The benefit of a change of church is that it can take you out of your comfort zone an - important experience to keep personal faith, fresh, alive and effective. All four of these church offered some new or different experiences but the biggest impact came from my visit to St Paulinus RC church. This was not directly from the service but for a reminder of a time, 20 years ago when, as a supply teacher, I taught religious education in St Peters RC Secondary School, South Bank.

While preparing lessons I read through one of the principle text books, used by the pupils, I came to the section dealing other denominations of Christianity. For the United Reformed Church it described one of the central beliefs in the reformed tradition, namely: the priesthood of all believers. In this our forbears fought for the right to have direct access to God without the need or help from priests to be a bridge between people and the Lord. The writer then went on to add that, while this was a fine idea, in practice worshippers followed the teaching given out by the preacher or celebrant as in the Roman Catholic Church. For me this was a salutary reminder of how others see us and not as we see ourselves.

This point was recently reinforced during an interview of the new General Secretary of the URC, Rev. Dr John Bradbury, published in the July/August edition of the Reform Magazine. In a question relating to evangelism he said: "We are good in church at talking about anything but God." And so here lies the crux of the matter - having a communication with God, or at least talking about what faith means to us. The 2021 URC Prayer Handbook is entitled Conversations. Here the editors describe practical prayer as - 'only ever on broadcast, never on receive'. Prayers offered in church - are spoken, offered, 'broadcast', often without response being sought or expected! And there lies a big problem.

However, it is not all bad news. Guisborough church did have a Bible study service some years ago and at our last service, the 15th, March, before Lockdown, we had 'conversations.' The preacher, Ian Smith, from St Andrew's Mission, Thornaby, presented a question and answer session, in place of the sermon. The theme was about water based on the well known meeting of Jesus with the woman at the well, as found in John's Gospel. This seemed to work quite well and could lead onto other such 'conversations' -,talking about God, as our National Church General Secretary, suggested we didn't do that well.

In the wider church the need to produce live streamed services during the lockdowns has produced an increased interest in matters of faith. Bethel Church in Otley, Yorkshire, with a usual congregation

of around 30, were surprised that over 70 people tuned into their streamed service, with some from countries such as South Korea, Poland and Dubai. Many other churches have reported similar experiences.

The Northern Province of the URC have produced a weekly E-Newsletter, since the first lockdown, offering a wider range of articles and activities - so helpful towards encouraging a feeling of togetherness amongst fellowships in the North East of England.

Justin Welby, the Archbishop of Canterbury, has also promoted the idea of togetherness with an initiative: 'Together in Unity' to support churches and communities around the country during the course of the Covid 19 pandemic.

Pope Francis has written a book of reflections during this difficult time entitled: Let Us Dream: The Path to Better Future. In it he says: "*Calamities such as this (Covid) can be a threshold experience, dividing one era from another. This is a moment to dream big. To rethink our priorities - what we value, what we want, what we seek - and commit to act in our daily life on what we have dreamed of*"

Before the pandemic Guisborough Church had an idea that by replacing the pews in the sanctuary we could have more flexibility in our relatively small building. It is first phase in our wish to offer facilities for outreach into the local community. Nothing would appear to be happening with the church being closed - but now is the time to dream. To dream of what we could now do. Time to think of new ideas, Initiatives and projects. We will get back into our church and, at that time, if one of our dreams can be converted in a practical reality - then that will be a 'benefit' of Lockdown. RT.

East Cleveland URC Church's Group News: In the December issue Roger Wheeler, the editor, asked for snippets of news from members for the February edition. These need to be sent in to Roger towards the end of January, or to me at raytunncliffe@yahoo.co.uk

GUISBOROUGH UNITED REFORMED CHURCH



Church circa 2010

56, Westgate, Guisborough.

HAPPY NEW YEAR

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Secretary 01287 637273