

The Church as Lazarus – Following Jesus in the Emotional Landscape

Discipleship is not an academic exercise. It is often, substantially, a journey through an emotional landscape. Sometimes those emotions are negative and dark: grief, suffering, pain.



This shouldn't surprise us. After all, to "abide in Christ", is to be *his*. To *follow* him is to live as Jesus did (1 John 2:6) and Jesus was, and is, and was prophesied to be a "man of suffering and familiar with pain" (Isaiah 53:3). Discipleship is about "sharing in his sufferings" (Romans 8:17). There is a *cost* to discipleship, as Bonhoeffer (amongst many others) would say.

I'm not trying to be morose. There is joy, peace, fulfilment, *happiness* even, on the road with Jesus. Laughter abounds. But these are not grounded in some sort of avoidance or escape, but are comingled, intertwined, with all that comes. The joy breaks out from the grief. The tears are wiped away. The peace is beyond understanding. Glory sprouts from the suffering.

A part of my emotional landscape recently has been grief. I have *grieved* this week for some reason. I was confronting myself. I was encountering some of those pains, regrets, fears, and worries that get pushed down until they pop up like fungi in the damp of one's hidden soul.

I was also grieving for the church. This has been a week in which the ugly side of us has been on display, for various reasons. The human sexuality “debate” has yet again be broached. I have had over twenty years of experiencing this particular no man’s land, and yet the vitriol, bile, and lip-curling condescension has shaken me. But my reflection hasn’t really been about #LLF (for those who know what I’m referring to); it’s a more general weariness. We love the church (local and large), and that involves care and belief. Yet the church often looks more like a phlegm-hacking pale-skinned shadow than the vivified vocational verve of the gospel we follow. Amidst self-referential ear-tickling comfort-mongering machinations I have also seen my own disintegrating compromises, conflicting responsibilities, and sheer plain finitude. For better or for worse, realistically or otherwise, that has been my recent emotional landscape.

So where is Jesus on that path? I’ve been finding him in a play of two parts:

The first part is an insight from my wife, Gill. This is not a surprise; she is regularly insightful. She took me to **the story of Lazarus**, who Jesus raised from the dead, in John 11:1-44.

The story may be familiar to you. Jesus is friends with Lazarus and his two sisters, Mary and Martha. While some distance away from them he learns that Lazarus is sick. He declares a hope that “this will not end in death” but it will “be for God’s glory” and his own. He delays his return. Lazarus dies. “Lazarus has fallen asleep; I am going to wake him up”, he says, “Lazarus is dead, and I am glad I was not there, so that you may believe.” There is hope; but Lazarus is dead.

Martha comes out to meet him. She presents a rational, theological engagement to Jesus. When Jesus assures her that Lazarus will be raised, she pushes that hope off into an

abstract future: "Yes, I believe that we will all rise again."
Lazarus is dead, Jesus, but we get the theory.

Mary has not come to greet Jesus, but he sends for her. Mary readily emotes. She collapses at his feet, and there is a tinge of bitterness to her voice: "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." It's only half a step from "Where the hell have you been! I thought we could trust you! I thought you brought hope!" Lazarus is dead, Jesus, where have you been?

Martha grieves. Mary grieves. And, even though he knows what is going to happen, **Jesus wept too.**

Here's the insight in this story for me: We are grieving for the Western Church like Mary and Martha grieved for Lazarus. Good people have been plugging away at gospel ministry for years, the church has been cared for in its fitness and its brokenness, its strength and decline. We have done our best to be faithful to our task, but in the end, we know, that none of it matters, unless Jesus shows up.

Our gospel preaching is nothing, if Jesus is not in it. Our social action. Our pursuit of what is good and holy. Our cries for justice. Our restructuring. Even our self-giving to one another in unity and peace-making. All of these virtues are not enough, except if the Spirit of Jesus be in them. There are times when we look at ourselves, locally, nationally, within our Western world and there is deathliness about us. And we *feel* the bitter tears. In that landscape, the blurted out "prayer" of the most visceral sort is: "Lord, when are you going to show up? Lord, why are you waiting? We can't change hearts. We can't overcome the power of sin. But you can! Where have you been?" We struggle to even pray "Revive us, Oh Lord" except in Martha-like abstract theory.

The church is Lazarus. And we are allowed to grieve. Yes, there is hope in this analogy, and we don't ignore it:

Lazarus is called back to life, away from the stench of death; a living reflection of Ezekiel 37. Jesus is glorified, and his people believe. And now, Jesus *will* be glorified, life will come. Yes there is hope. But let's not rush quickly there. Right now can be a time for weeping.

The church is Lazarus. And *Jesus* weeps. And that's OK.

It brings me to the second part. I have tried to imagine Jesus weeping: tears rolling down middle-eastern skin, cheeks and beard. Were they gentle tears? Or sobbing? Were they sympathetic tears for Mary, or tears of his own response, akin to the woundedness he cried over rebellious Jerusalem (Luke 19:41)?

My task as a disciple of Jesus is to follow him. How then, may I be led by his emotions? What would I learn if I could watch his passions, see his tears, and hear the prayers he whispers through salt-dripped lips? What may I glean from his demeanour when he encounters stress, grief, injustice, and utter weariness? Where can I go to *learn* from him, and be his disciple?

The gospels are good place to start. But the Scriptures also give us a fulsome emotional repertoire: the Book of Psalms.

Let me get there somewhat theologically: Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed heir of the messianic king David. David points to Jesus. The psalms of David are the prayers of David. They are the prayers of a messiah. Prophetically, therefore, they are the prayers of *Jesus*. The New Testament often uses the psalms this way. Take a look at Hebrews 1:5, quoting Psalm 2:7 – “You are my Son, today I have become your Father.” Keep reading that Psalm and on the lips of David it is somewhat pretentious, but on the lips of Jesus it is simply, right: “I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession.”

So now I can read the psalms, and hear them on the lips of

Jesus in the emotional landscape. In the psalms is faith-filled joy, faith-filled peace, faith-filled anger, faith-filled weariness, faith-filled grief. In the psalms, the Spirit of Jesus is praying, and I can *learn* from what is prayed.

I can see Jesus expressing gentle but firm defiance against political power in Psalm 2:1-3: *"Why do the nations conspire and the peoples plot in vain? The kings of the earth take their stand and the rulers gather together against the Lord and against his Anointed One. 'Let us break the chains,' they say, 'and throw off the fetters'"*

I can see Jesus putting faith against fear in Psalm 3:1-3. I wonder if these were amongst his groanings in Gethsemane?: *"O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!... But you are a shield around me, O Lord; you bestow glory on me and lift up my head."*

I can see the protective frustration of Jesus in Psalm 4:2-3: *"How long, O men, will you turn my glory into shame? How long will you love delusions and false gods? Know that the Lord has set apart the godly for himself; the Lord will hear when I call to him."*

I can hear the weariness of Jesus and a sinking into his Father's arms in Psalm 5:1-2: *"Give ear to my words, O Lord, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God, for to you I pray."* I wonder if these were in his laying-awake, or his mornings when he sought solitude with his Father.

In some psalms I think we see the prayers of Jesus on behalf of his people; the Spirit gives voice to the collective, broken, Body of Christ: *"O Lord, do not rebuke me in your anger or discipline in your wrath... My soul is in anguish. How long, O Lord, how long?"* (Psalm 6:1-3). Is this a glimpse of Christ's intercessions for us before his father (Romans 8:34)?

"O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth!" (Psalm 8:1) and I hear my Saviour's delight.

Right now, anyone who cares for the Lord, and for his people, is likely passing through an emotional landscape. Here, as ever, the Lord weeps too. Here, as ever, Jesus teaches us his way.

Photo by Joshua Earle on Unsplash

Lockdown #2 and the Identity Crisis of the Church

In the first lockdown of 2020 churches were prevented, by law, from opening. In my own denomination the restrictions went even further: private prayer was not allowed, funerals were not allowed, and I, the vicar, couldn't even mow the lawn. There was some sense to it; we didn't know much about the virus and we all wanted to do our bit to protect the vulnerable.



It was, at the very least, inconvenient. Then the *pain* of it began to emerge, especially for those for whom physical sacrament and physical fellowship is an essential part of comfort and faith. Most of us took on board that pain and sought to use the season as a time of refining and realigning. Here was an imposed fast, a slowing down, a solitude. There was blessing in it. If nothing else, it taught us how to go online!

But now we have the second lockdown. It's different from the

first. The approach is now more targetted, firstly by region, and now by activity. Schools are not closed. Some businesses are not closed. But church buildings, once again, *are closed* for public worship, even the facemasked, distanced, non-singing, non-hugging, non-chatting sort of public worship that we've been exercising and enforcing over the last few months. Private prayer is allowed. Broadcast of worship is allowed. Foodbanks and other ill-defined services of help are allowed.

The mood in the wider community is different this time. The main difference is the *inconsistency* of the response. We were all in it together in March and April. But now we know that the rules don't apply if you're powerful and have family in Durham. The rules don't apply in the North until the South gets impacted. You're allowed to have a working lunch with a colleague, but you can't share a pint a few hours later. You can pay a housecleaner to come in to your home for hours at a time, but if you meet your grandkids in the park for a few minutes you're breaking the law. There is *anger* now. Some of it is unhelpfully absolute ("The pandemic is a lie!") but most of it is about weariness, confusion, and injustice.

So what is the church to do? In comparison, for my own church context, this second lockdown isn't *terribly* inconvenient. It does affect some more than others, of course, and we're doing what we can. Once again, if we have a mind to it, we can roll with the pain and the frustration and let it refine us. Who are we? What are we missing in this moment? How does this reveal what we are longing and yearning for in the Kingdom of God? We can share in the pain of the wider community and get clarity about our sense of hope. That sounds like the stuff of advent to me!

It's not our place simply to reflect the popular mood. If there is anger in the community, might it be that our task is to seek peace? I certainly don't think that the American-style bandwagon of #letusworship protests are in any way helpful to the gospel. Neither, in this moment, are acts of eucharistic

civil-disobedience. Special pleading for churches to open is rightly met with incredulity; why should we get to operate our religious business when the gym owner can't, why should we get to meet with our friends on a Sunday morning when the local football team can't?

At this point we reach the crux of the issue. **Who are we, that we should be allowed to meet?** That's a non-rhetorical question, it needs to be answered: **Who do we think we are?**

In one of my former churches a local public relations company generously offered the church some pro-bono work. The analysis they did was helpful and insightful. But what struck me was this: They approached it in terms of "marketplace." In their framework church is a leisure activity. We are competitors seeking a share in the market of people's free-time and discretionary-spend. For a theologically pretentious person such as myself, this is a confronting thought, because there *is* some truth to it. For the vast majority of people there is work time, family time, and leisure time. Church fits into the last category, with some overlap into the second. There is some *good* to that; we are a place where people can *be* and *receive* and *be fed* and not have to *perform*. If we do it well, we have a positive effect on wellbeing; we strengthen families and can provide relational, emotional, and practical first-aid when times of stress come along. But, of course, a football club, or a hiking group, or a bunch-of-old-schoolmates-who-catch-up-on-a-Tuesday-afternoon can do that as well, maybe even better. **Church is not *just* a leisure activity.** If we were, then we should, rightly, and consistently, be closed up with the rest of those groups right now.

Are we anything else? To some extent, we're also a *business* activity. We employ people. Much of what we do is charitable works (more on that in a minute), but we're also content producers, pastoral carers, cleaners, support staff, and so on. We've already had to work this one through when

there were restrictions on “socialising”: Is the vicar having a cup of tea with Mrs. Jones socialising or *working*? It *is* work, the exercise of a *profession*. (It’s also socialising, but let’s not complicate things for Mrs. Jones.) Moreover, there *is* a religious industry, and, if I were to be cynical, there may be some churches who are only pushing to open because the plate hasn’t been passed and the bottom line is hurting. But, of course, **church is not *just* a *business activity***. If we were, then we should, rightly, and consistently, be closed up with the other businesses right now, and be hurting right alongside them.

Of course, churches also do *good works*. We are charitable enterprises that perform a utilitarian service. Who was it that recently tweeted that we have become the “church of good” more than the “church of God”? We run foodbanks, and support groups, and mental health services, and so on. We can argue, therefore, that the church provides essential services. Indeed, this *is* recognised; these clearly definable essential services have been allowed to continue. But is that really who we are? Such services often run out of churches because we have a philanthropic volunteer base, perhaps a higher degree of altruism. But a foodbank could be run by any group of well meaning group of civic-minded folk. The **church is not *just* a provider of essential utility**. Where we are seen to be such, we are rightly, and consistently, allowed to keep operating.

What we are running into is a different sense of what is *essential*. And that raises the question of: **Who are we? What is *our* essence?** There can be no escaping it; we are a *worshipping* community. We are *theologically* defined in our very soul. We are students of Jesus. We believe he died, rose, and is with us by his Spirit. We devote ourselves to him through private and corporate rhythm and ritual. We seek his Kingdom Come, which is more than just the doing of good, but the pursuit of a fulsome transformation of community, society, and individual lives... for *his* glory.

We don't bother with church just because we're fond of the people there and because we get a sense of being fed and fulfilled; **we are not just a leisure activity.**

We don't bother with church just because we've got a job to do, or a duty to perform; **we are not just a business activity.**

We don't bother with church just because it can do some good in the world, and fill a gap in the social fabric; **we are not just an essential utility.**

No, we bother with church because God is bothered with us. And he calls us to devote our whole lives, our careers, our families, our passions, our dreams, our finances, and our time, to the pursuit of his kingdom... together. We are the body of Christ. And it is Christ who is our core, our essence, our reason to exist.

So the restrictions on public worship are not just an inconvenience for us. They brush up against the existential depths of our very selves.

The lockdown is easier for some traditions than others. For some it is impossible to detach the physicality of this essence, e.g. the eucharistic presence for our Anglo-Catholic brothers and sisters, the raising of voices together in praise and worship for our Charismatic friends. For others, worship and fellowship is more cerebral and oral and aural; we can express it with some adequacy in an online setting. For myself, I think we can weather the lockdown in this current moment, at least for a short time. But, in essence, I agree with those who are starting to push back at the government: To be *who we are* we need to worship. **We don't need the building, but we do need to meet.** It is not some "essential service", **it is simply essential** to what it means to be who we are. We don't want to lose ourselves. If this season goes on too long I will add my voice to those who are saying "We can do this safely, let us worship together."

But in the meantime there is a provocation for us. We are being made to confront ourselves. **I wonder how many Christians are actually agreeing with the government.** I don't mean about the policy decision, but about the miscomprehension of what it means to be a Christian community. Is church, to us, just a leisure activity, a practical pursuit, an altruistic provision? Is that what gets us out of bed on a Sunday morning when covid isn't around? If so, then we really really need the lesson of this moment. If so, then we have just become a hollow shell, confused about whose we are and what we actually care about.

The Archbishops' are right, let's make this lockdown a time of prayer. Let's make it a time of re-devotion to the Lord. Perhaps we'll find ourselves.

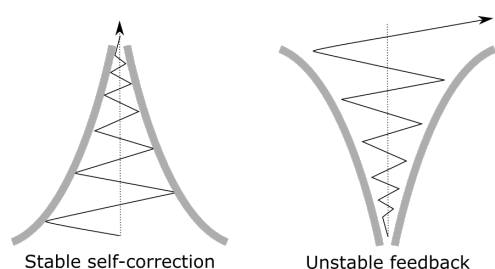
Speed Wobbles in the World and Church

I woke up this morning, the day after the 2020 US election. I'm slightly despondent because it's close to being the worst possible result. I can say that without showing political bias because there's no winner yet! It looks set to be a close, contestable outcome, and I can only see further division emerging.



I've been thinking about it: America, and the Western World,

has the **speed wobbles**. Do you know what I mean by that? Speed wobbles happen when you're on a bike, or perhaps a scooter, or some other form of vehicle. At a certain critical moment there can be resonance with the bike's built-in instabilities; the bike lurches from left to right and left to right, again and again. It falls afoul of its own feedback loop of movement until it crashes and causes injury. It doesn't crash into anything. Nothing happens to it. It crashes into itself.



The physics is graspable. A system is in some sort of equilibrium, running along smoothly until something shifts; the bike-rider adjusts for a change in the road. At this point there is always a form of over-correction. We

start heading too much in one direction, we pull back to the other, go too far, and return back towards the centre. In a stable system these over-corrections slowly diminish until the equilibrium returns. In an unstable system each over-correction amplifies the next and it goes back and forth with increasing crescendo until it all falls apart.

We've got the speed wobbles in the West. There are two over-amplified directions. We have Trumpism on the "right", pulling back from government over-reach but also towards the gutter of blatant mercantilism and nationalist oligarchy; and the Wokeism of the "left" pulling us away from deep-seated social injustice but also towards the gutter of blatant progressive moralism and enforced globalist conformity. In the end, both extremes are terrible options; all gutters connect to the same sewer. So we lurch back and forth trying to avoid both.

The Western church is another example. We've come to look like the world, and so we reflect these two extremes. The gutter at one end is caricature of "evangelicalism" and "traditionalism". The former looks like a consumer-class hypocritical industry; by way of example, take a look at the portrayal of Christian marketing in Amazon's *The Boys* and

you'll wince at how it hits close to home. The latter can look like a non-benign fanaticism, complete with the funny clothes. The gutter at the other opposite end is a similar Christian veneer over the worldly spirit. It is a caricature of social activism that becomes a militant more-equal-than-others paganism, preaching a message of autolatry ("You do you, you're perfect as you are") and burning nonconformists at a de-platformed stake. Again, both extremes are unpleasant reflections of each other.

We're not fully in those extremes of course. But we are wary of them, and usually seek to avoid them. The world is full of good people trying to put a tick in the box next to the candidate who is the least bad. The church is also full of faithful people seeking to avoid the divisive extremes, looking for a common ground somewhere amidst the encroaching shibboleths. As we search we move from left to right, and right to left. At a certain point of instability, the speed wobbles appear.

There are many factors to this instability. Social media is certainly one of them. It forces nuanced adjustments to pick a side: "Are you for us or against us? What's it going to be? If you're not us then you must be them. All lives matter. Silence is violence. Wear a mask. Don't be a sheep!" etc. etc.

So here's the thing. What stops it? Once the speed wobbles start, how do you stop them? Doing nothing is not an option. The instability of the system itself drives the over-reaction. Without intervention a rending apart is inevitable. So what to do?

Many of us have become adept at hauling back in the opposite direction to the currently favoured force. It doesn't work in the end. Usually it just adds to the instability. Many of us have tried the art of the compromise, to do our best to speak of the common centre ground which will "dampen down" the volatility and bring stability. But that won't work if that

shock absorption is no longer part of the system. No bike rider can maintain a constant series of equal-but-opposite reactions when it all goes wobbly.

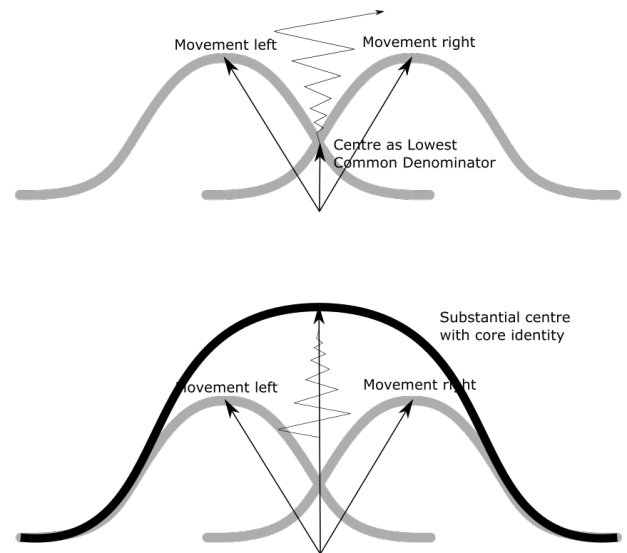
What is needed is a force, a movement, a direction that cuts across the oscillation. On a bike you get rid of the speed wobbles sometimes by slowing down, but also by speeding up, in the *forward* direction.

This is how it used to be in the political sphere. I heard a commentator the other day who had studied political manifestos from the 1950's. Political rivalries were just as impassioned then, but this was the observation: It used to be that the political differences were about different ways of applying the *same idea* but now they are about two competing ideas that are different altogether. That common *idea* was the stabilising forward force.

Finding that common idea is hard. It's not enough to long for it in the abstract, to speak of wanting *unity*, or *peace* for instance. Unity around what? Peace in what sense? These things only really exist as an appeal to something deeper, a sense of *identity*. In the UK, for instance, there was once a sense of what it meant to be "British." For better or for worse, the notion of "For King and Country" was a unifying stabilising common ground. The Americans have had the "Free World" as their identity marker. They may not be *great* identities, but they are stabilising ones.

In the church we have a similar difficulty. Our common ground has become abstract. We reaffirm that we are the "body of Christ" and that we "see Jesus in each other, no matter our differences." Such articulations have an admirable intent, but they only work when there's substance underneath the form. Who actually is this Jesus that we can conceive of and see in each other? If we can't agree on that big idea the instability only increases.

It's not enough, you see, to maintain the status quo. You can't re-centre an unstable system simply by reflecting the lowest common denominator in the middle. Look at what the church *does* talk about, either collectively or through its public persons, and you'll see what our lowest common denominator is: climate change, feeding the poor, and generally being good citizens. We agree on such things. But what *aren't* we saying? That's what is missing in the middle.



A broad church, well centred, is a thing of beauty, but that's not the same as a church with two centres and an overlap in the middle. We can do our best to maintain that overlap, but it *is* in an inherently unstable system. The speed wobbles will start, and appeals to unity in the abstract are not enough to provide the centring, stabilising force.

I'm not sure what a positively centrist message looks like in the political world. I'm actually entirely open to the possibility that we've gone past our Commodus moment. It may be that the demise, decline, and fall of the Western world is as inevitable for us as it was for Rome, once it lost its way and didn't know who it was anymore. When I pray for our leaders in the political sphere, and other places of influence, this is the heart of my prayer: Oh Lord, give us the grace of a leader with a positive vision of how we can come to a substantial centre.

I pray something similar for the church world. But, of course, here there is a clearer kerygma. The centre has always been about Jesus. It's always been about worshipping him, learning from him, following him, as we gaze upon him through the revelation of God's word. There is no other Christian identity

other than Jesus. When we are defined by him, in the ancient posture of sanctification rather than the presumption of our self-made existence, we are more and more his.

It is therefore, of course, why as Christians we are now looking to Jesus who is King of Kings, and Lord of Lords, able to still the nations (Psalm 46:10). As the political world around us wobbles into a collision with itself, we, once again, entrust ourselves to one who is a rock on which to stand.