

Loving Where You Put Your Feet

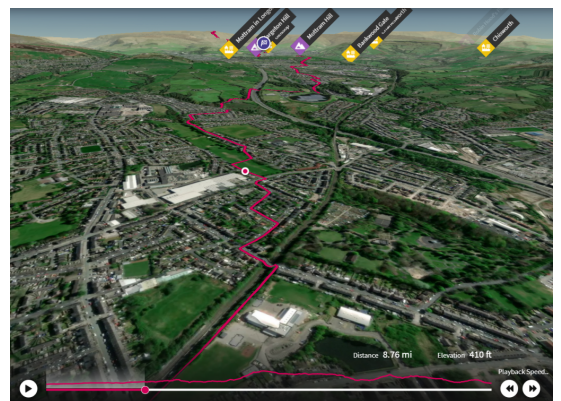
This is a story of a virtual pilgrimage, and sowing the seeds of the real one.

During the lockdown of early 2021 we were all, of necessity, spending a lot of time in our homes. As I pondered the tumultuous year that had been 2020 I found myself on the Ordnance Survey website looking at some of the places where we had walked during the summer. I love maps. I value my Ordnance Survey (OS) subscription!



I found myself, with podcasts playing in my zoom-seasoned headphones, scanning the map of the country that I have come to call home. I “visited” Land’s End – the most Westerly point of Great Britain – and I began to ponder. How *do* people do that famous “LEJOG” walk, from Land’s End to John O’ Groats. What paths do they take? What does it *look* like?

On the OS maps you can zoom right in. You can find the public rights-of-way; the green-dotted lines that give us the right to walk across fields and forests and back alleys and carparks of industrial sites. The satellite imagery lets you know if it’s paved or gravel or overgrown-tangle-of-nettles-and-brambles. You can see when the way is blocked by a river, or a motorway, a railway, or an MoD restricted zone. I began to plot a route, planning my path, imagining the place where feet might tread...



I became lost in it. Even on a screen, it became something of

the rhythm of trudge. I've done a lot of hiking in my youth. I know what it's like to be in that zone. It is a place of peace, and of processing pain; it's a place of simply being on an internal journey while the outside moves on past. This is part of walking-as-pilgrimage, as I understand it: The interior journey and the exterior journey align.

As the lockdown continued, the virtual journey did too. I began to ponder what was moving me. In the end it wasn't to travel across Britain, it was to travel across *England*. We've had this heart for a while: The Scottish love Scotland, the Welsh love Wales, but who loves England? As my computer screen took me across moors and meadows, suburbs, cities, and industrial scars, I was beginning to pray for this adopted country of mine. I want to love the place where I put my feet.

Now my virtual pilgrimage had purpose. Lands' End to Lizard Point takes us to West and South extremes. It would end in Marshall Meadow's Bay, on the Scottish border in Northumberland. Lowestoft Ness (near where I was born) would take me to the most easterly point, and some of the lowest points in East Anglia. And why not take the route to Scafell Pike, and stand (virtually) speaking on England's tallest point?



But even with all the cardinal points, so much would still be missed. Praying and loving the scenery I saw (on a screen in a vicarage study in Sheffield), I found myself visiting every Cathedral in the country. It would take a zig zag up the country; two thousand miles of plotted pixels and roads to imagine.

And then it was done. Not in reality; just in my heart, and on an internet site. But what would it take "IRL", as they say? Google tells me that pilgrims on, say, the camino de Santiago, can average 15 to 20 miles a day. I plotted it out. Averaging 17 miles a day, with a day off every week, a real-life walk, a

placing of love-plodding feet, would take 140 odd-days. That's a sabbatical and a few weeks annual leave! Perhaps one day...

But it got me thinking. It got me pondering my own interior life, as well as my own physicality. I wasn't sure I could walk five miles, let alone seventeen! I might not be able to walk across the land; but could I even walk across the *city* to which God has brought me? I love this place; and I'm learning to love it more and more. It has posh green parks, and broken old factories, ancient ruins, and legoland low-rises; and people of every colour shape and sound.

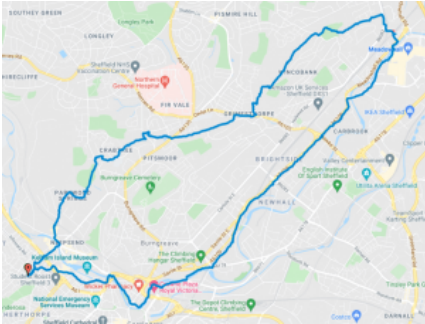

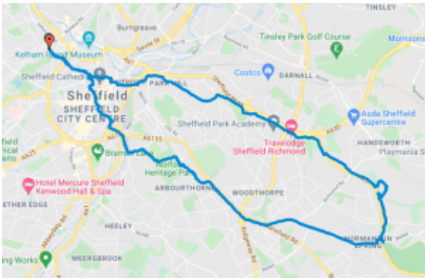
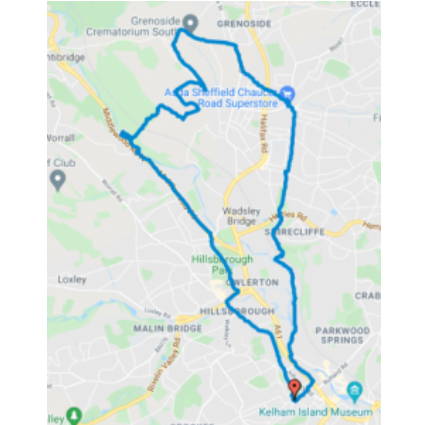

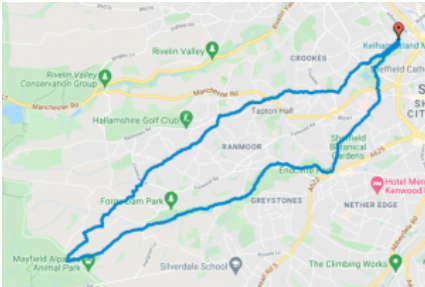

Throughout his year, therefore, I've been doing a local pilgrimage; loving the place where I put my feet. It began with "loop walks" from my house. I walked to Meadowhall and back; nine miles and I couldn't walk for a week! It has ended with long treks to other counties, to return by train; sometimes alone, sometimes with companions, or larger groups.

Each walk – whether four hours long, or eight hours long – has been a *journey*. Sometimes there's been a bounce in my step. At other times I look at the horizon to where I'm going and I'm plodding, and hurting, and wondering why I bothered. Leaning into joy, or into pain and weariness; such is life.

And I have *seen* the place to which God has brought me; nooks and crannies and even some hidden paths that I would never have discovered. I have chatted with a few along the way, and received encounters as God's invitation.

The routes I have taken form something of a flower-shape; these became my "flower walks" of 2021. And they have been a joy. They'll continue into 2022, where I'll continue to love where God has put my feet. Feel free to join me!

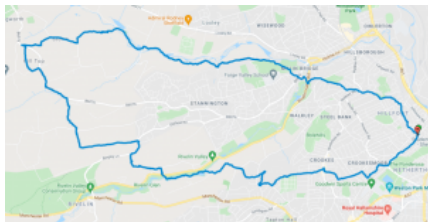
And for those who would like to know the detail of where I've been....

	<p>FEB 2021 – MEADOWHALL AND BACK</p> <p>Nine miles, and I couldn't walk afterwards. The five-weirs walk, and then back along the hills.</p> <p>I discovered Wincobank! Iron age history, and a patch of moorland in the midst of Sheffield suburbs.</p>	
	<p>MAR 2021 (#1) – WOODHOUSE AND BACK</p> <p>Eleven and a half miles alongside the Parkway before looping down and back along the tram road, finishing with Norfolk Park and through the central city.</p>	
	<p>MAR 2021 (#2) – GRENOSIDE AND BACK</p> <p>A tick under ten miles, and feeling stronger. A walk along the Don River and through the suburbs of Parson Cross before farm fields (muddy!) and Beeley Wood and returning through Hillsborough.</p>	
	<p>APR 2021 (#1) – PORTER BROOK AND BACK</p> <p>The snow was falling! Ten and a half miles across to Endcliffe and all the way up the Porter Valley and back through the suburbs of Fullwood and Tapton Hill.</p>	



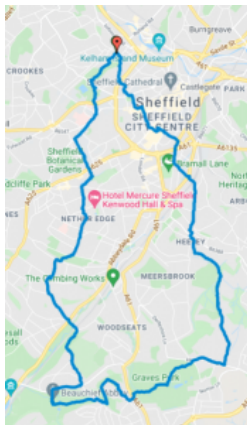
APR 2021 (#2) – CATCLIFFE AND BACK

For twelve miles, I was joined by two fellow travellers and a dog! Through Darnall and Tinsley Park, almost to the M1, before coming back through Handsworth, and back along the Parkway. At the turnaround point, it felt like a long way from home.



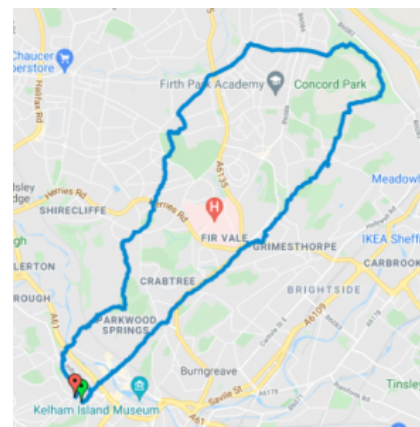
MAY 2021 – DUNGWORTH AND BACK

Across to Hillsborough and then along the Loxley Valley. The hills and valleys on the way back matched some ups and downs in my interior life. Each hill was a push.



JUNE 2021 (#1) – BEAUCHIEF AND BACK

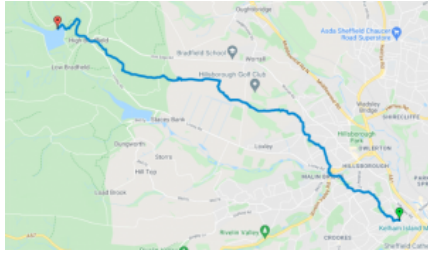
A loop into South Sheffield, through Nether Edge to Beauchief, across to Graves Park, and back via Heeley. I struggled with foot pain, but the day was a joy, resting in God.



JUNE 2021 (#2) – SHIREGREEN AND BACK

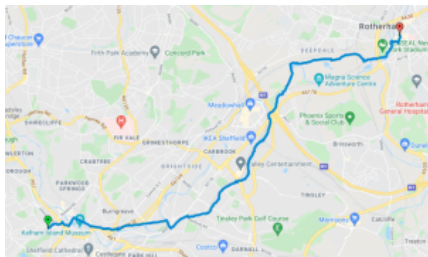
I was joined by my daughter for a loop into North Sheffield, through Fir Vale to Concord Park, and back through the old and new estates of Shiregreen and Longley to Parkwood Springs. This was to bring the “loop walks” to a completion.





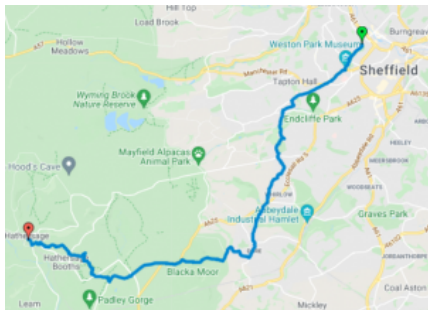
JULY 2021 – AGDEN

It was time to go on a journey “with an end” and not loop back. On a hot day, family and friends were going to Agden Reservoir. I joined them, walking through Hillsborough and the edge of Wadsley, and through beautiful farmland to High Bradfield.



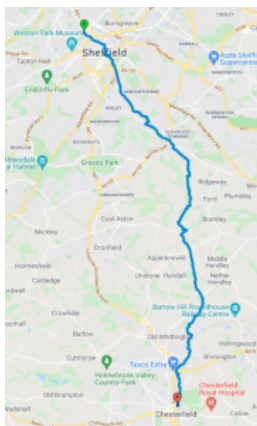
AUGUST 2021 – ROTHERHAM

I’d been set back by a dose of covid. I need a walk that was a physical rest. A gentle flat walk along the canal to Rotherham was perfect. This was also the beginning of a new season (post-summer) of integrating physical, emotional, and spiritual health. More on that soon.



SEPTEMBER 2021 – HATHERSAGE

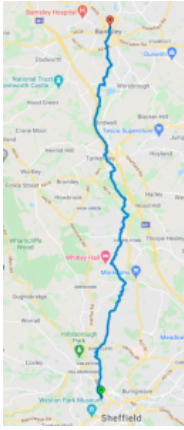

It was time to be stretched; to throw some caution to the wind. I was joined by a dear friend on a journey to Hathersage, through the well-to-do suburbs of South Sheffield and over the peaks, on a gorgeous, spirit-lifting day.



OCTOBER 2021 (#1) – CHESTERFIELD

Another shift in season. It was time to walk to somewhere, not just *from* Sheffield. I pushed long to Chesterfield, from suburbs to suburbs with farmland in between. Some of the paths were overgrown. This was a solitude walk, a time of retreat.

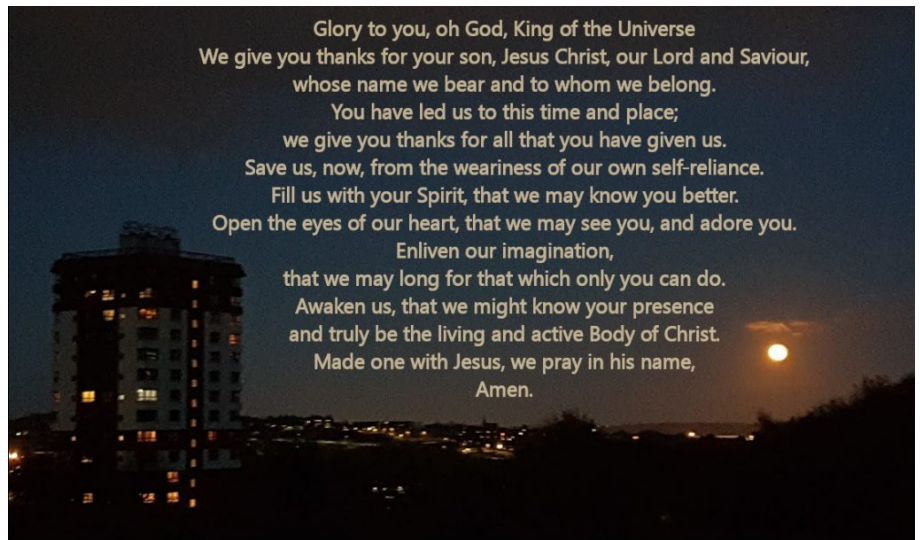


	<p>OCTOBER 2021 (#2) – BARNSLEY</p> <p>Joined by two good friends, this was an adventure for all of us. Through north Sheffield suburbs and outlying villages, interspersed with fields. This path went alongside the M1 for quite some time</p>	
	<p>NOVEMBER 2021 – EDALE</p> <p>Time to walk as community. A group of about a dozen, from all different walks of life, joined me on a perfect autumn day, across the peaks, to Edale. This pushed the limits physically. Walking together is slower, but much more enjoyable. Fellowship at its best.</p>	
	<p>DECEMBER 2021 – WORKSOP</p> <p>Winter was closing in, and so was my mental health. This was a solitude walk, almost impromptu as the diary cleared along with the weather. A day of retreat and soul searching as I trudged beside still waters.</p>	

The pilgrimage will continue in 2022. Nothing forced. Semi-planned but impromptu. With solitude, and togetherness. Loving where we put our feet.

A Prayer For Our Church

Last week I was at a conference where the following words were used to describe our current circumstance:



Volatility
Uncertainty
Complexity
Ambiguity

I won't unpack those words here; they speak for themselves. They certainly describe something of what it's like to be working, living, and breathing within the context of a parish church (as well as more widely). The normal means and methods of planning and strategising are being lashed by this perfect storm.

And that's OK.

In fact, in so many ways, these are the exact circumstances in which the church of God should revel and excel. This is not because we are more stable, certain, simple, and clear than any other part of society, but because the gospel we cling to speaks of a God who is! He is a rock and a refuge. Lo, he is with us always, to the very end of the age. Including in the storms.

In the light of this, I have been struck, recently, by how St. Paul prayed for his churches in the midst of their own volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous days. He didn't pray, first and foremost, for a change in their circumstances; he prayed for an opening of their eyes to see and *know* the one

who is *with* them in all things.

¹⁶ *I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers. ¹⁷ I keep asking that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, may give you the Spirit of wisdom and revelation, so that you may know him better. ¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe.*
Ephesians 1:16-19a

This is my prayer for the church, also.

⁹ *...since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, ¹⁰ so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.*
Colossians 1:9-12

We have so much. We have theological and teaching resources. We have freedom to worship, and people to proclaim the word of life. We have resources of time and money. We have the necessary institutional frameworks. We absolutely have the *opportunities* to serve, care, and speak of the way of Christ. We might pray for more of these things, but we have them already.

Our plate is full, so to speak. What we *need* is a desire to eat and drink of that which has been given to us. This is eucharistic mystery: “Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood; has eternal life and I will raise them up on the last day” (John 6:54). We are happy to arrange the room, set the table, even welcome and serve the dinner guests; we have planning meetings and strategy documents and even some slick slideshows to prove it! We would do it all, but one thing we lack: to sit down and *eat and drink* of Jesus himself.

Oh that we would behold him. See him. Know him better. Yearn for him. Long for him. That we would be in *orbit* around him and have *confidence* that when he is known, and followed, as the Way, Truth, and Life, then – and *only then* – will the life-filled kingdom of God be on earth as it is in heaven.

So “open the eyes of our heart”, Lord! Just as Paul prayed long ago. Give us the Spirit by which we may see you and *know* you. *Enlighten* us with a revelation of how you are with us, and call us, and shape us, and change us, and move us. *Awaken* us, Lord, to the truth of who you are. *Enliven* us that we might overflow with the marks of the one to whom we belong. The rest of it will come from that. Without that, the rest of it is wearying and ultimately worthless; and I think we know that in our hungry spiritual bellies.

To that end, I’ve written a prayer for the church communities to which I belong. It’s not particularly precise or poetic, but I wonder if you might join me in praying it with me each day as we head quickly towards advent, the season in which we wait for the Lord. We *will* wait for the Lord.

Glory to you, oh God, King of the Universe

We give you thanks for your son, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour,

whose name we bear and to whom we belong.

You have led us to this time and place;

we give you thanks for all that you have given us.

Save us, now, from the weariness of our own self-reliance.
Fill us with your Spirit, that we may know you better.
Open the eyes of our heart, that we may see you, and adore
you.
Enliven our imagination, that we may long for that which only
you can do.
Awaken us, that we might know your presence
and truly be the living and active Body of Christ.
Made one with Jesus, we pray in his name,
Amen.

Q&A: How does the church move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

Anonymous asks:

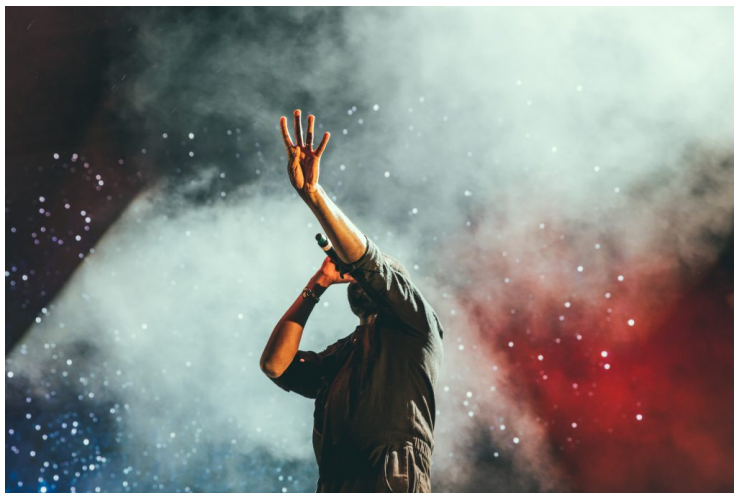
How does the church, especially the evangelical/charismatic wing, move away from the “singing group leader” = “worship leader” model?

The same problem exists in the traditional robed choir churches. I recall hearing one Dean talking about the cathedral choir delivering “high quality” worship. I remember my first vicar preaching a sermon telling us that the same word is used for “worship” and “service” in Greek. I think we could do with some teaching on this issue at some point.

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this

blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>

Thanks for the question.



To get to your final point first. What you describe is a *cultural* problem. It's something for which "teaching on the issue" alone is not enough. I can give something of a theoretical and theological response, but in the end this matter is one of the heart, of desire, of the orientation of our lives. It is, absolutely and in fact, a matter of devotion and worship.

I'm reminded of the complaint received by a pastor one Sunday: "Pastor, I didn't really enjoy our worship this morning." The response? "Well, that's OK, we weren't worshipping you."

To be frank, an honest assessment of our motivations for turning up on Sunday morning would probably reveal how self-centred we tend to be. That's not *necessarily* bad; we can come to church seeking relief, solace, or comfort, and while these are self-centred, God loves us and delights to graciously give us good gifts. However, we can also come to have our egos stroked, our angsts papered over, and our privileges decorated in virtue. "I'm not getting what I want from church! I'm not being 'fed'!" can be the genuine complaint of the spiritually hungry soul, or the entitled whinge of an acceptable form of ecclesiastical narcissism. Usually it's somewhere in between.

As a vicar, when I field complaints about church, (“The children were too noisy”, “The livestream isn’t family friendly”, “I didn’t know the songs”, “The sermon was too long”, “The sermon was too short” etc. etc.), I have learned to parse the feedback through this frame. Is it genuine feedback that I really should listen to? (It often is.) Or is it a self-centred demand for a better performance from myself or others? (That happens as well.) I have learned to look for the issue behind the issue. I ask myself, and sometimes the person who’s talking to me: “That’s interesting. What are the expectations that are not being met? Is it actually my job to meet them?”

This, of course, raises the question of what the “job” of Sunday actually is. Your suggestion is helpful here. Yes, “worship” and “service” share some semantics, and the original greek words are worth exploring:

λειτουργία (leitourgia), from which we get “liturgy”, relates strongly to the sense of “serving.” It pertains to things such as a military or civic service, or the duty of giving alms to the poor. In a religious setting, the priests in the temple *serve* God, through offering sacrifices or administering other rites and ceremonies. It sounds dry and dusty, but there is a real depth to it. It is right to come to church for spiritual succour and solace, but we also come to serve God and to minister to one another.

λατρεία (latreia) takes it further. We find this, for instance, in Paul’s exhortation to the Romans. If only we heeded it, Sundays would look a lot different! “I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper *worship*.” (Romans 12:1) Here worship is a self-offering, a *giving of ourselves* to God. It is this form of worship that we should be modelling for our children, every day, rather than the consumerism that

our generation has bought into.

προσκυνέω (proskyneo) is a verb and speaks of adoration and devotion. This is worship in the form of a kiss of reverence, or of lying prostrate. In the gospels, many worship Jesus in this way, including the disciples in Luke 24:52 at the time of Jesus' ascension – "they worshipped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy." This is the worship of surrender, and love, deep love of God.

To answer your question: The extent that our church culture can align with these forms of worship is the extent to which our focus will move away from the "singing group leader." Rather, the focus will be on a self-offering to God. In fact, the other reasons why we come to church will find their place. We come on Sunday for **worship**, and also **discipleship** and **fellowship**. *Discipleship* is about having our whole lives taught and shaped by Jesus by the truth of his word and the power of his Spirit. *Fellowship* is about doing that together, spurring one another on to righteousness (Hebrews 10:24-25) and being united around Jesus. All of that is *worship*. And in that sense our "worship leaders" will be our pastors, and prophets, and teachers, and all the other gifts at work.

But in the end, just as we said at the beginning, this is a matter of our collective heart. To make that move would require cultural change, including the need for repentance. Many, if not most, of our churches enable self-centred consumerism. When worship is about me... If I go to a church *service* so that I can be well *served*... then I will be attentive to how well the *servants* are performing for me. And so I will prefer the high quality choir, or the anointed "singing group leader", and that's where the focus will be. I will value the *performance* because it adheres to my self-absorption.

The irony is, of course, that it's actually in *real* worship, in *the* ministry (leitourgia) of our devoted (proskynew) self-offering (latreia) that worship actually becomes a moment of

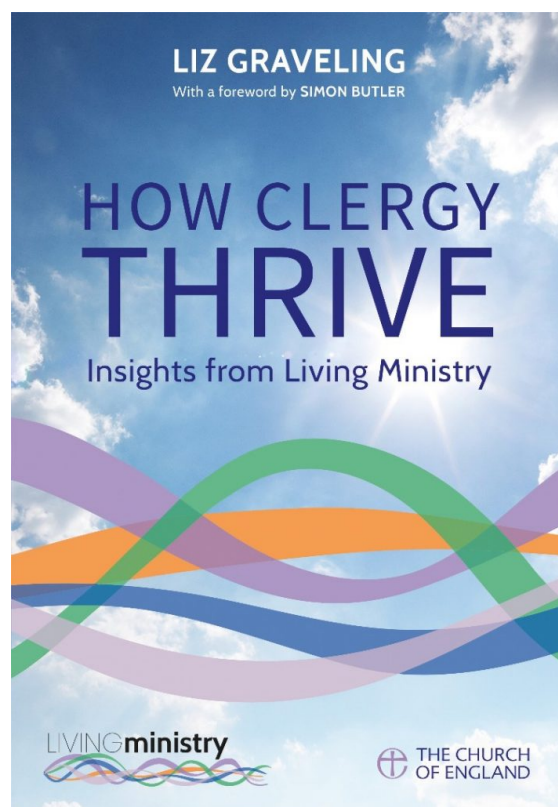
real fulfilment and self-discovery. I am “fed” by worship when it’s not about me, and, consequently, not about the person on the stage.

Musical excellence is not irrelevant, of course, and it’s worthy of some investment. But the musical leaders who truly serve (*leitourgia*) us are marked by humility, and self-effacement (*latreia*) and turn us to devotion (*proskynew*), not adulation. It’s not easy for them. We love our celebrities, and we will always be attracted to those people through whom we have encountered the presence of God in some way. It is understandable that we will turn to them to seek more of the Lord. We will want to pitch our tents there, as Peter desired to stay on the mountain of Transfiguration. The wise worship leaders will simply echo the voice from the cloud on that day: “It’s not about you, it’s not about me; here is Jesus... *listen to him.*”

Photo Credit: Austin Neill on Unsplash

Review: How Clergy Thrive – Insights from Living Ministry

How Clergy Thrive is a short report in the Church of England that was released in October 2020. It provides insights from the *Living Ministry* research programme, a longitudinal study into clergy wellbeing that has been following four cohorts of clergy and their families. It is substantial research and author, Liz Graveling, presents it well. It pushes in the right direction but, unsurprisingly, falls short of a fulsome exhortation for the cultural and structural changes that are really needed.



I have attended enough “resilience” sessions at clergy conferences to approach a report on this topic with a healthy cynicism. This report avoids many of the normal pitfalls.

For instance, clergy wellbeing is often reduced to a matter of individualised introspection and the promotion of coping mechanisms. Refreshingly, this report recognises that “wellbeing” is a “shared responsibility” (page 7). It notes that the “the pressure to be well”, itself, “can sometimes feel like a burden”. Indeed, “clergy continuously negotiate their wellbeing with institutions, social forces and other people: family members, friends, colleagues, parishioners, senior clergy and diocesan officers, as well as government agencies and market forces.” We clergy live in a complex web of ill-defined social contracts. We are often the least defended from the inevitable toxicities. A recognition of this *system* is a good foundation.

Similarly, the multifaceted approach to “vocational clarity” (page 9) deals well with actual reality. There is always a gap between the “calling” of ministry and the “job” of ministry,

between the way in which the Holy Spirit gifts someone to the body of Christ, and their institutional identity. In my experience, the wellbeing of a clergyperson is essentially shaped by one's emotional response to that gap. Wellbeing is encouraged by stimulating and supporting a clergyperson to reach an honest, holistic, and healthy equilibrium. It is undermined by arbitrary training hoops and merely bureaucratic forms of institutional support. The short discussion on where annual Ministry Development Reviews are either helpful or not (page 9) or even damaging (page 10) indicates that this dynamic has been recognised. The many "questions for discussion and reflection" are also helpful.

It's impossible, of course, to read something like this without evaluating my own wellbeing and the health of the institution to which I belong. I have my own experiences, of course, including some significant times of being unwell. Here, however, my attention has been turned to the cultural and structural problems that are revealed.

Take the surveyed statement "I feel that I am fulfilling my sense of vocation" (page 11). It is noted that "79% agreed they were fulfilling their sense of vocation." This sounds reasonable. However, I'm not sure if that positive summary is quite what the data actually suggests. Only 47%, less than half, of the respondents can fulsomely agree with vocational fulfillment. The other 32% in that 79% can only "somewhat agree", and a full 20% is neutral or negative.

In many professions this picture might be excellent. Retention rates for teaching, for instance, indicate a 30% loss after five years.¹ We must, however, make a distinction between an ordained vocation and most other professions. In ordained life, one's profession is not just one facet of life, it is holistic (page 7); it captures many, if not all, of life's parts. *Integration* of those parts is key to being healthy. How can it be, then, that 53% of our clergy are not able to fully

find themselves within the life of the church? From my perspective, this speaks of a consumeristic culture in which clergy are service-providing functionaries rather than charism-bearing persons. Perhaps it simply speaks to an unhealthy culture in which it is tolerable for square pegs to be placed in round holes despite the inevitable trauma. Whatever the case, this isn't about the church institutions *doing* wrong things, it's about innate ways of *being* wrong; we need to change.

We see glimpses of this same sense throughout. Consider the relative benefits of the activities that are meant to support clergy (page 14). The more positive responses correlate to personal activities or activities that are outside the institution: retreats, spiritual direction, mentoring, networks, and academic study. The institutional supports such as MDRs, Diocesan Day Courses, Facilitated Small Groups and so on, are of relatively less benefit. In fact IME Phase 2, the official curacy training program, scores worst of all! I cannot speak to IME – my curacy was in Australia – but the rest of the picture certainly matches my own experience.

This is observation, not disparagement. I generally sympathise with those in Diocesan-level middle management. They have tools and opportunities that look fit for purpose, but they so often appear to run aground on deeper issues they cannot solve. Dissatisfaction then abounds. A related observation is this: It appears to me that a common factor amongst the poorer scoring forms of support is that they are often *compulsory*. This invariably amplifies dissatisfaction. Appropriate accountability and commitment aside, compulsion usually reveals an institution propping itself up through confecting its own needfulness.

Again, when “sources of support” are considered (page 31), the ones most positively regarded are non-institutional: family, friends, colleagues, and congregation. Senior Diocesan Staff, Theological College, and Training Incumbent score low.

This is understandable and perhaps it is unfair to make this comparison; no one is expecting the Bishop to be a greater source of support than one's spouse. However, the question wasn't about support in general, but about "flourishing *in ministry*", and the picture remains stark. Note, also, that the most negative response that could be offered was a neutral "not beneficial." If a negative "unhelpful" were counted, the picture might be even starker.

My point is that *cultural* problems are being revealed. If only 63% of respondents could agree, at least somewhat, that "the bishop values my ministry" (page 49) then this is not so much a problem in our bishops, and certainly not the clergy, but in the institution in which we all embody our office.

Remuneration and finances are also revealing. 45% of the respondents are "living comfortably", but 81% of the respondents had "additional income" (pages 39-40) which, I suspect, relates mostly to the income of a spouse. To some degree, this is all well and good; a dual income usually means a better quality of life. Nevertheless, the sheer disparity in financial wellbeing between clergy couples with one or two incomes cannot be ignored. The provision of parsonage housing is a factor; in other occupations accommodation costs generally rise and fall along with household income and dampens the disparity. More importantly, however, is how this reflects the *individualisation* of vocation, and the shocking degree to which clergy spouses are simply invisible, for better or for worse, within the Church of England. It is also my experience, both personally and anecdotally, that the wellbeing of couples who are both clergy is not well assisted in our current culture. This is especially so for those called to "side by side" ministry, who share a ministry context and usually only one stipend. It's well past time to allow for couples to be licensed and commissioned *as couples*, like many mission agencies do. We need the means to share remuneration packages and tax liability, and, at the very least, the

provision of National Insurance and pension contributions for the non-stipended spouse. Our current culture does not allow for this.

Finally, this study would do well to extend its work to take into account the effects of incumbency on wellbeing. I wonder what proportion of the respondents, given their relative “youth” in career-length terms, have reached incumbent status? Incumbency comes with a certain level of stability, power, and protection. Attached to incumbency are checks and balances on institutional power. Incumbents are more clearly party to the social contract between clergyperson and institution. Associates, SSMs, permanent deacons, and the increasing numbers of crucial lay ministers are not as well protected. They *do* “find themselves overlooked or under-esteemed” (page 35). The increasing prevalence of non-tenured and part-time positions in the Church of England is a structural concern that *does* effect clergy wellbeing. We need more work here.

How Clergy Thrive has painted a useful picture. There is scope for even more insight. The benefit of longitudinal research is that the story of wellbeing can be told *over time*. The testimonials in this report reflect this and are very helpful. It is unfortunate, however, that most of the data is presented as a snapshot census-like aggregation across the cohorts. An accurate picture of how wellbeing ebbs and flows as a career progresses would help us all. If we knew, for instance, at what point in their career a clergyperson is most likely to not be thriving, we could respond. If clergy wellbeing suddenly drops, or if it slowly diminishes over time, that would teach us something also.

Like the vast majority of reports, this one struggles to answer the question of “What do we do about it?” How *do* we help clergy thrive? In the end, it appeals to an acrostic: THRIVE (pages 56-57). It’s not bad. It’s healthy advice that I’ve given to myself and to others from time to time: Tune into healthy rhythms; Handle expectations; Recognise

vulnerability; Identify safe spaces; Value and affirm; Establish healthy boundaries.

These principles are applied, to a small degree, to how the existing system might do a few things differently. In the main, however, they describe what clergy have managed to do for themselves. It's a story of *technical* changes for the institution, but *adaptive* change for the clergy. We need the reverse of that.

The life of a clergyperson exists in an impossibly complex interweave of pastoral, strategic, and logistical expectations. Technical changes in an institution often only add more expectation and more complexity. We have a structural problem. We have forces vectoring through things that are too old, too big, or too idolised to be modified. Instead, they are dissipated through the clergyperson, and other officeholders, but *not* the system itself. Personally, I've learned to find my place and peace with much of the machinery, and to look for the best in the persons who hold office. I have done this, in resonance with many of the testimonials in this report, by trusting real people when I can, and by not giving myself, or those I love, to the church system itself.

It's not enough for the ecclesiastical machine to *do* things better. It must *become* different. Take heed of the testimonial on page 25 – "I wouldn't really trust my diocese to make them aware that I have a mental health issue." Imagine, instead, that the diocese was for that person a fount, a fallback, a refuge, or a hope! In short, imagine if the church (ecclesiastical) really aligned with being a church (theological). That's the redemption we need. I wonder if the "big conversation" alluded to on page 6 will help.

Like most intractable problems, the hard thing is not about noting the problem. It's not rocket science; we "just" need real Spirit-filled personal nourishment and discipleship. It's the getting from here to there that is difficult. Difficult,

but not dire. There are times when the right people are in the right place and it just works. For myself, I hold to a glimpse of how things might come to be:

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need an "MDR", they need to be *overseen*: a regular conversation with a little-e episcopal someone who can cover them, is for them, and who has their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need strategic plans and communication strategies, they need to be treated as the little-p presbyters they are: brought into the loop, entrusted with substantial work without being second guessed, and given space to be themselves without having to watch their back.

What do clergy need to thrive? They don't need a "remuneration package", they need to be *provided for* with decent housing that's fit for *their* purpose, enough money to feed their family and prepare for the future, and an assurance that spouse and children will also be backed and supported without needing to beg or "apply."

Footnotes

1 – National Foundation For Educational Research, 2018

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 life 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.

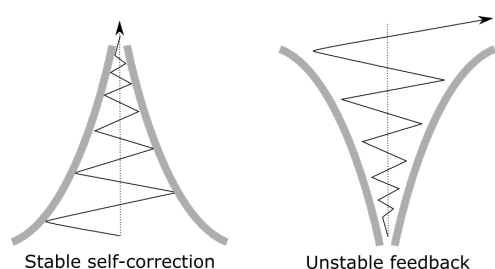
Speed Wobbles in the World and Church

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 it's 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.

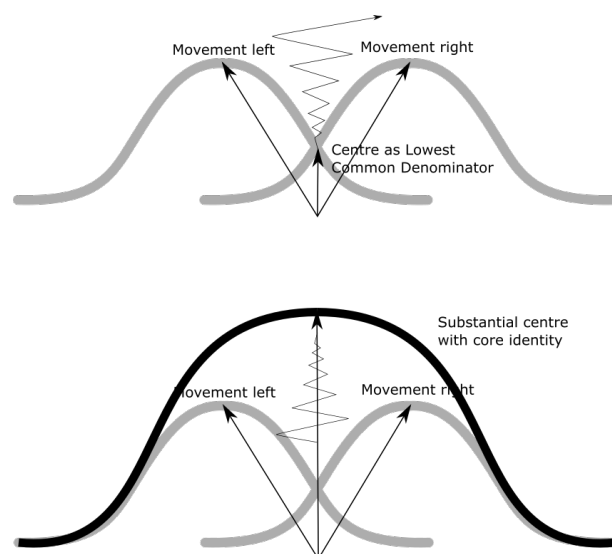
What is needed is a force, a movement, a direction that cuts across the oscillation. On a bike you get rid of the speed wobbles sometimes by slowing down, but also by speeding up, in the *forward* direction.

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.

Video Series: Being God's People At Home

God is leading us and calling us in this strange season. It's an opportunity to invest in a mode of being his people that draws us closer to him, stimulates our call, and increases our delight in the leadership of Jesus. This immediate time will shape us and serve us as we go into what is ahead.

Gill and I and others in our household have been putting together some thoughts and talks about how we might respond. In particular, how we might grow in the reality that we are currently expressing as "church in our homes" and while our homes are the location of God's church. In our homes, households, and "telehouseholds" we minister to one another, and draw closer to God.

Two videos have been uploaded, we'll be releasing more over the next little while from time to time.

Video 1: Introduction

Q&A: How do you distinguish between your feelings and what God is saying?

Anonymous asks (in response to a teaching time from one of our recent livestreams):

How would you distinguish between the words in your head and what God is saying?

I'm sure the Bible says not to act in feelings but if it's a feeling God is giving you how can you know it's from him?

[This is a Q&A question that has been submitted through this blog or asked of me elsewhere and posted with permission. You can submit a question (anonymously if you like) here: <http://briggs.id.au/jour/qanda/>]

I really appreciate this question. It's an honest question. I think many of us ask (and answer it) without noticing, particularly when we are uncomfortable. It's when we find ourselves *confronted* by or *disagreeing* with something we read in the Bible, for instance,

that these questions arise: What is wrong here? What doesn't sit right with me? Why doesn't it sit right? How do I wrestle with it?



Too often, rather than wrestle with it, we put the niggly thing aside so that we can simply feel comfortable again. It is rarely the best way forward.

So how might we explore your question?

Firstly, let's look at things in general:

Your question is what we call an *epistemological* question. *Epistemology* is how we think about *knowing* stuff, particularly how we know what is right and what is wrong.

It the words in my head say something is true, is that enough or do I need something else? If it *feels* right, does that make it right? That's the sort of thing we're talking about here.

Our answer is affected by historical and cultural differences:

- Some cultures emphasise *tradition* as more important than individual feelings or realisations. If you *feel* something is wrong, but the cultural tradition says it's right, then the individual gives way to the collective wisdom. The internal process is like this: "I recognise that my experience is limited. Our tradition reflects the shared experience of generations of people, and is therefore less limited. Besides, I want to continue to fit in, so it is therefore more likely that I am wrong and the tradition is right."
- Some times in history have emphasised *reason* as more important than feelings or individual intuitions. The so-called "Age of Enlightenment" from the 1600's through to the 20th Century picked up on this. "Truth" is determined by logic, and science, and cold hard calculations. This is an aspect of what we call *modernism*.
- In the "post-modern" era (20th Century into the present day) we have elevated the value of individual feelings

and thoughts. "Truth is experience" is our catch-cry; if we can't feel it, it is not true. There's value in this. Cold, hard, abstract theory, is not enough to guide and shape our lives. Our lives are also full of creativity, mystery, and the delights of the senses. We are also aware that beneath traditions and logical frameworks there are often hidden emotions and prejudices and unspoken power dynamics; we *deconstruct* these so-called truths as the self-serving assertions they actually are. "Going with your gut" rather than arguing yourself into subservience is a virtue in this worldview.

What does this tell us? That the "words in your head" and your "feelings" are not without value, but neither do they solely determine what is true and what is right. I know from my own experience, that my emotions are often broken. For instance, I have had a break down and depression; during that time my feelings about myself did not match the reality about myself and I had to learn to realise that. There have also been plenty of times when I held a view fervently that I subsequently came to realise was *wrong*. It is impossible to learn or grow without agreeing with the possibility that I've got something to learn.

Secondly, how do we approach this from a Christian perspective?

Our faith in God introduces something else into our epistemology. We believe in a God who is not distant and aloof, but is *involved*, not only in the history of the world, but in our lives. We therefore believe in a God who *speaks*, through word and action. What he says is a *revelation*; it reveals truth about who he is, about who we are, and about what this world is like.

So how do we know what that truth is? How do we know what is being revealed? What is God's revelation to us?

The beauty of it is that God's revelation is *objective* and *external* to us. God's truth doesn't depend on us. This is a good thing! If it did, our sense of truth and of right and wrong would be self-defined. The truth is that God loves the world, and loves *me*, whether or not I feel it or "know" it. The truth is that there is right and wrong in God's perfect justice, even if my heart has been hardened and my mind has been dulled, and I am either justifying myself or falsely tearing myself down.

This sense of God's revelation is found in two forms:

It is found in what we call "general revelation"; there is truth to be found within creation and from looking at what is in front of us. "The heavens declare the glory of God", the psalmist says. "Since the creation of the world", Paul says, "God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made." This is how Christian belief embraces and recognises the value of the sciences; it is a study of creation and of humanity that reveals much truth.

It is also found in what we call "special revelation." That is, if God is close, and interacts with his creation, then God reveals himself in *history*. The written accounts of that history will then also reveal him. From looking at that written history we also see how God speaks through *inspiration*. He *speaks* to his people. Sometimes (but not often, it usually freaks people out), this is a direct "voice from heaven" (Exodus 20:18-19, Matthew 17:5). Often it is through the inspiration of a *prophet* who is set apart by God to speak to the people on God's behalf. It is also through the giving of the Law, and in the inspiration of songs and poetry. The Bible is full of these things: history, law, prophetic writings, wisdom and creative writings, the accounts of Jesus' life, and letters from his followers.

When we say "The Bible says" what we mean is that "God has

revealed himself, in history, saying.” God has even spoken about how he speaks. “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The Bible is therefore an *authoritative objective revelation* for us.

The beauty of it is also that God’s revelation is *subjective* and *personal* to us. God isn’t relegated to speak to us in dry and dusty texts with dogmatic formulae; he whispers deeply and personally into the deepest parts of our heart. He calls us by name. He *knows* us. Jesus revealed himself to others in this way. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit who is our Advocate and Counsellor. Sometimes the whispers in my head are prompts by the Spirit of Jesus. Sometimes my feelings are the way in which God is waking me up to his truth, a light in the darkness around me.

So how , then, do we *know*?

We can be certain of something when it all lines up and there is agreement in our epistemology. When our own feelings and logical thoughts agree with the traditions around us... when those things line up with what we read in the Bible and how we feel the Spirit is speaking deeply into our souls... then all is well and good. We have a sense of being *sure*.

When there is disagreement between these epistemological sources, however, we have some wrestling to do.

In particular, when I find myself wrestling with a part of the Bible that doesn’t “sit well” with me, I churn it over.

1. **I look to myself.** What I’m trying to do is to work out what is happening within me. I name up the feeling: Am I feeling angry, guilty, annoyed, fired up and frustrated? What’s going on in me? Are those feelings associated with experiences in my life that I haven’t resolved yet; is there some pain and trauma that is getting poked? **How is this Scripture offending me or moving me?** I don’t

pass judgement and soothe the feeling, I consider myself and work out what the problem is. I recognise that my heart is often fickle, I don't quickly agree with it, but I acknowledge the reality of my feelings.

2. **I apply some reason and look to logic and tradition.** Am I reading this part of Scripture correctly? Do I actually understand what is being said? Have I properly got into the world of those who first read it, and understood what they were hearing? Have I shoved my situation into the text and reacted to something that was never intended in the first place? How have other people understood it over the years? How have they applied it? What can I learn from them?
3. **In all this, I pray for the Holy Spirit to help me.** I ask for the Spirit to *illuminate* my wrestle – to give me insight into the Scripture, or an insight into myself. I trust that the Lord has something for me in the revelation of himself. Sometimes I've had a sense of words "jumping out at me" from the page, or stuck in my mind while I dwell on them. Sometimes the Spirit of God works through these things. But! Just because I feel it, doesn't mean that it's the Spirit at work. In particular, the **personal revelation of God to my spirit will never be at odds with his objective truth in Scripture.**
4. **I do it in community.** I share all this wrestling with others, even it's just one person like my wife or a friend. I explain to them what I'm feeling, and how that's colliding with the words in the Bible. We pray together. We reflect on it together. We wrestle together. And sometimes there's a prophetic word within that community that sheds light and makes things clear.
5. **I allow God to be God.** In the end, I entrust myself to God. It's nice to have our feelings resolved, and to be comfortable with the Bible and God's word, but it's not always the way that leads to growth. Sometimes God is drawing us deeper, and we need to give it time. **I can**

avoid the pain of that growth by setting God's word aside by either judging it to be wrong, or subjectifying it as irrelevant to me. But, if I want to grow, I need to allow the wrestle to remain. I fall back in confidence on the things that are sure – e.g. God's love and truth and the beauty of Jesus – and trust God with the rest. Even, and especially, when we cannot see, we acknowledge our blindness, and reach out for God even more.

I hope that answers the question. How we wrestle with our feelings and our own understandings is key to our discipleship and our caring for one another. Thanks for asking. Hope these thoughts help.

Delight and Defence of The UK Blessing

If you're anywhere within 200ft of a Christian's social media you will have encountered this youtube video. Musicians and worship leaders from a number of churches across the UK, singing "The Blessing" over the nation.



The video is here in case you've missed it: [The UK Blessing on youtube](#).

Let me be clear from the outset here: I *delight* in this song and how it's being used. This post isn't a substantial

critique. It's a bit of wondering, a bit of defence, a bit of leaning off from it to think about the times we're in and the church of which we are a part. The song itself (attributed in the main to Kari Jobe and Cody Carnes) came into the limelight coincidentally with the Covid-19 pandemic. We've sung it ourselves as a household in this strange season.

So here goes: I **delight** in this song.

I delight in the content of the song. Its main motif draws upon the Aaronic blessing of Numbers 6:22-27:

The Lord said to Moses, 'Tell Aaron and his sons, "This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them:

“‘The Lord bless you

and keep you;

the Lord make his face shine on you

and be gracious to you;

the Lord turn his face towards you

and give you peace.’”

These are deep and rich words that Scripture leans on from time to time to give assurance of God's love and favour. It's there again in Psalm 67, for instance. It's not about individualistic blessing: the focus is on *nation* and *generations*. This also has rich grounding (Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 7:9) as does the invocation of God's *presence* (e.g. Joshua 1:9) and God being *for* his people. These deep waters well up in the New Testament (e.g. Romans 8:31) as declarations of how fundamentally, totally, existentially, substantially, utterly, profoundly is the blessing of God to be found in Jesus of Nazareth, died and risen again as Lord and Saviour!

Notice how a lot of this biblical grounding is from the formative days of God's people, Israel, in the time of their rescue from slavery in Egypt, their wandering in the wilderness, and the entering into the promised land. These

were not easy roads. There were afflictions from around them, and the afflictions of sin and wayward hearts within them. Sometimes it may seem like the loving heart of God looks like discipline (some of us are feeling that at the moment) and feels like his absence (ditto): but the deeper truth remains and calls the heart to trust him. He is for you. He is with you, to the thousandth generation. May his face look upon you and give you peace. **At this time of affliction**, however we might feel it and experience it, these are life-giving words to sing.

Of course, some may (and have) suggested that the blessing that the Scriptures reserves to God's people shouldn't be invoked over the world at large. The critique is not invalid: the blessing of God is not merely a universally and thinly applied sense of warmth, it is deep and located and especially attached to God's determined work, his promises to his people, and his presence in the person and work of Jesus. But it's not wrong to pray for the blessing of many. I've addressed this question before. I long for all people to know the loving presence and saving grace of God, who knows us and made us and has given us his Son to save us and lead us into an eternal life that begins now. Especially now.

I delight in the recording and release of this song. Having had to come to grips with sermon recording and livestreaming, I can very much delight in the video and audio editing skills!

It's not perfect, of course. I've already seen some comments from those who haven't seen someone who looks like this that or the other; not all the intersectional categories have been covered. I feel it a bit myself; there's a lot of big evangelical charismatic mega-churches in that mix: Where are the "ordinary worshippers" who look more like me and mine? I've got a well-honed cynicism after years in this church game. The "what about me?" response is an understandable human reaction, but in this case I/we should get over it.

This song hasn't come from some tightly planned bureaucratic focus-group vetted process of fine-tuned diversity management. If there is anyone who has "made it happen" it's Tim Hughes (formerly of Soul Survivor, and now of Gas Street Church Birmingham) and his espoused attitude towards the song is commendable. It has come about from a loose arrangement of friends and networks and invited and offered contributions. It's organic and messy, and therefore not perfect. And that's good.

It also hits a pretty good balance regarding the spotlight and avoiding the sort of brand-driven recognition we often slip into. One of the *points* of this song is to show that the churches are alive and working together. So it needs some sense of being able to recognise people and places and names of congregations. It does a good job of avoiding the celebrity factor. People are not named, *churches* are. It's been released under a neutral brand. The naming of churches serves the purpose of showing a community of communities without overdriving the brands. And I love knowing that there are Eastern Orthodox and Catholics and !Pentecostals and St. Someone's of Somewhere all in the mix.

For me, unlike other attempts at this sort of thing, this feels like my brothers and sisters, and I can sing with them. I *know* these faces. I have seen quite a few of them in real life. I've had conversations with a number of them. There's at least one face in that mix that I've served coffee to across my dining room table. The family of God is both bigger and smaller than we think.

Again, I'm good at cynicism. I've seen ego-driven light-show presentations done with not much more than a Christian aesthetic. This is not that. It's not absolutely pure and precise, but so what? It's a cracked-jar crumpled-paper offering of people who want to declare the love of God over a hurting nation. It is something to delight in.

The only thing that wears my heart, just a little, is this. There's not enough of Jesus. One of the cracks in our jar (that I think this current season is rubbing at, one of the loving disciplines of God for us right now) is that we have been in a rut of church being about church rather than church being about Jesus. The church *is* a blessing – but that's a truth of vocation (what we are called to and enabled to be) rather than identity (what we are by our own right in and of ourselves). The declaration at the end: "Our buildings may be closed... but the church is alive" is great, but it's unfortunate in that it's simply about us. It's the same with the blurb in the video description which is about *our* unity and *our* good works. It's almost there, but not quite. **We are only a blessing because Jesus is. We are only alive, because Jesus is. Let's say that.** We embody the blessing, but Jesus is the substance of it.

We're not singing ourselves over the nation, we are singing the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord. Keep doing it.

Amen. Amen. Amen.