**Church and Community 2020 - most were written for our local church Loughton Methodist Church {LMC}**

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘Changed lives’ [2020 10]**

There’s a great deal in the New Testament and Christian living about changed lives – as unique or ongoing events in the journey of Christian holiness.

At present, because of covid-19, we find ourselves with many unwelcome changes. Some of us are retired, others in work or working from home, others unemployed. Some of us live by ourselves, some with other people, some are missing our children or grandchildren, still others are experiencing loss or grief. Some young people are finding themselves at a standstill. All are having to cope with change on a massive scale.

We’ve been talking hard about what to do separately and together; with and without occasional visitors; given newly learnt IT systems; given all Tony can’t do. Pre-covid we had our routines, activities, projects and our ‘communities of interest.’

We notice our church minister begins the Sunday on-line worship by describing the different ways people can access our church and then says: “remember we are one church and worship the one God together”.

So, the question becomes how do we stay in touch, how do we communicate, how do we be communities in which people genuinely meet?

**Here are four decisions that are helping us both in relation to our local church and in our daily living:**

**[1] Pick up the phone to friends or family members you’ve lost contact with** – or dare, we say it, quarrelled with. Put it right. Sort it out. Be brave and persistent. What is going on in an age of electronic communications when people don’t answer? We remember people used to speak of ‘snail mail’ – well, with all due respect to snails, it’s the people who need to stop being snails!

**[2] Join or start IT links [phone, email, zoom, facetime etc.]** – Doing new things isn’t easy but go for it. Barbara’s choir has become joining son Adam’s folk club ‘sing-around’ based in the North East. Tony’s art-class has become on-line sessions with teacher Ruth Dronsfield. What else might be offered on-line for our local church?

**[3] Think about the church as a ‘community of interest’** – We recognize that the phrase ‘communities of interest’ might sound a bit tame compared with, say, religious devotion, or Christian discipleship or political commitment. But it has helped us think about our local church and other groups: how they function and what we value - be they ‘meeting in person’ or ‘virtual meeting.’

Wikipedia has: “A community of interest is a gathering of people assembled around a topic of common interest. Its members take part in the community to exchange information, to obtain answers to personal questions or problems, to improve their understanding of a subject, to share common passions or to play.”

**[4] Prepare for better days** – a lot of people [not least in the media] sound somewhat apocalyptic. We need to nourish ourselves with words and people who are life-affirming. We need ideas, as in the Wikipedia definition, that are full of energy. We need to take hold of the fundamental insight [a truly Jesus of the Gospels insight] that our own self-identity and our capacity to meet with others are at the heart of being human, come what may.

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘Power and Christian living’ [2020 09]**

**[1] Thinking about power - “the power of ‘A’ to do to ‘B’ what ‘B’ cannot do to A - attributed to Charles Elliot who was a Director of Christian Aid.”**

If humans live by breathing air, then you might say human relationships breathe power. I recall many conversations about power in church house-groups – what it is, what it means, who has it, and who hasn’t got it.

Let me give a few examples.

We know what it is to not have power when we are severely limited ourselves - say by illness, disability, external threats such as covid-19. We know what it is to not have power when we find ourselves powerless. This happens for many in terms of basic human needs – food and money. It happens for all of us in personal situations when we feel helpless, ostracized, lacking skills.

We know what power is when we judge it to be misused. This is when the actions of those ‘in power’ are unjust, corrupt, abusive, oppressive, violent. ‘Those in power’ who misuse their power stretch all the way from domestic and sexual abuse to the damaging policies and actions of the leaders of major institutions and governments. Indeed, as is obvious, a great many of the violent conflicts around us are disputes about power and authority.

**[2] So, why am I writing about this and where does it fit into being Christian or the Gospels and New Testament texts?**

Those of us who use the name Christian differ in so many regards. At an extreme some people who use the name offend and embarrass us!! It is partly because of differing traditions and interpretations. But it is mainly because no one is ‘only’ a Christian but is also [for example] part of a family and mother-tongue, an ethnic group, a culture, a political system – each with their own values and aims.

But let me attempt a ‘bold take’ on the Gospels and the New Testament texts. I think that, in a straightforward sense, the Jesus of the Gospels is an alternate to other world-views.

To recognize this does not mean you have to deny the reality of our world: it is the only world we have! Nor do we have to regard it as evil or sinful. Nor does it mean people should be absolutist or separatist in their Christian communities. But it does mean [to think of Martin Luther’s ‘two kingdoms’ language] that our loyalty, to the radical demands of the Gospel of Jesus, informs all we are and do.

As Christians we’d say that as we engage with our beliefs, worship and devotional-practice so we live them out in the Gospel-values of [for example] kindness, grace, compassion and forgiveness

My best judgment is that the fundamental choice is whether or not we strive to do this in a non-violent way. In practice this choice of non-violence – of seeking to use our power without using violence - is the one that shapes and determines all our actions.

**Tony Holden ‘Being satisfied’ [2020 09]**

Being satisfied is not the same as being ‘self-satisfied.’

Sometimes as Barbara and I sit, with our coffee and cake. in our small garden, I think “what more do I need: what more could I possibly want than this?” Of course, I do know that there are many forms of fulfilment. But it is always worth registering when we are content, happy, fulfilled, and being satisfied.

I’m thinking of ‘being satisfied’ as opposed to being anxious, not being able to sleep, being so worried s/he can’t leave the house or even “[being paralysed] with fear at the prospect of our own mortality.” Serious stuff!

Being satisfied is especially important when life is personally difficult. Also our world, viewed through the media, is one of such uncertainty, pessimism, and threat. We may rightly ask: how do we keep faith? How do we stay balanced? How do we nourish and value our own satisfaction? How do we respond to the happiness and fulfilment of others we know?

**I find that being satisfied includes –**

**[1] Our concern for others** – Firstly, I think of those who would answer the question ‘what more?’ by saying: “food and water for today;” “safety from war;” “protection from domestic violence;” “health care.” We have to be careful not to be burdened by the world’s ills or human suffering especially as seen on TV! I would argue there is no gain in “beating yourself up.” But what we do need, given our concern for others, is for deeds of kindness and compassion.

[**2] Valuing the lives of others** – I frequently write emails to friends. It’s my way of getting out and about! I also follow people I know on Facebook which, for all the political-issues, has put me back in touch with many people. Being a grandparent gives us new opportunities to relate to young people. All of these humans are part of my life [our community] and the task of valuing people, on screen and ‘in the flesh,’ [given all their differences] is a profoundly fruitful one.

**[3] Our personal journey** – At this time I’m thinking of how we miss worship and Christian fellowship and the hugs of friends because of covid-19 restrictions. I’d say that personal satisfaction includes other people but doesn’t depend on them. To me human interdependence is obvious. Yet some people deny it out of [say] selfishness, fear, misplaced anger. But the quest for personal growth and maturity [‘holiness’] is something we have to own for ourselves. In this we are alone.

**[4] Work and practice** - I suggest two ideas help. We have to ‘work at’ our own journey or spiritual pilgrimage. And we need a disciplined ‘practice.’ Many who ‘work at’ prayer, mindfulness, creativity – ‘practice.’ There is something here about being solitary not lonely and about self-worth not self-aggrandisement. It is to do with using our confidence, and the way we handle uncertainties, for ‘the common good.’ It is, to use a favourite marathon-image, about keeping going.

**Tony Holden ‘Crossing lines’ [2020 07]**

I got into thinking about ‘crossing lines’ when our Loughton Methodist Church was doing a virtual ‘Love Feast’ [July 2020].

**Love-feasts** - I recall Christian ecumenical conferences [ONE for Christian Renewal 1972-1982] and using Love Feasts. We had some hard conversations about how we shared the Lord’s Supper, Communion, the Eucharist and how our Catholic friends fit in. As Peter Brain put it: “The downside of 'imitation eucharist' was outweighed by the upside of 'together in Christ'.” What I remember most is people weeping at our failure to be one and our decision to do something together which was about ‘crossing lines’. Three sharper memories surface.

**Ireland and Northern Ireland** – In 1988-89 Rev Dr Richard Jones was President of the UK Methodist Church and he took me with him to the Irish Methodist Conference which was in Londonderry. It was still a time of armed British soldiers on the streets. [I think] it was the first time the Conference was addressed by a Catholic Bishop and on the strength of that a small group of us got ourselves invited [thanks to Vice-President Jennie Carpenter’s intervention] to be shown round one of the Catholic estates. It ended, drinking tea and coffee, in a Catholic community centre – ‘crossing lines.’

**Interfaith dialogue** - By the time we lived in Wolverhampton [1971-1976] our careers were set and, with Barbara leading, they included interfaith dialogue. This in MP Enoch Powell’s home-patch. Of all the many events, celebrations, debates I can see us sitting on the floor in a Hindu temple or Sikh gurdwara. There we were: men on one side and women on the other - with a gap between us. We looked at each other and for a moment or two chose to hold hands. It was our way of being there and ‘crossing lines.’

**Mission alongside the Poor Programme [1987-1999]** – Part of my national work for the Methodist Church was Officer of this Programme. It involved committees, writing, fundraising, grant-making – and visiting projects around the UK. I had done this part-time for five years on racial justice issues so, in my own way, was used to the poor and rough end of towns and cities. I recall that, as a small group of visitors, we stood on some white outer-estate looking at boarded-up houses. The local community worker explained that people boarded them up for fear of their neighbours. And, in so far as you can feel for others, I felt extreme despair – ‘crossing lines.’

**And today** – covid-19 still threatens. As we watch TV and social media far too many of our world-leaders are selfish rather than collaborative; failing to see “all lives are equally grievable;” favouring violence. And so, in this day – today - we are ‘called’ to be ‘crossing lines’ that are to do with our own resourcefulness and faithfulness.

**Tony Holden ‘All lives are equally grievable’ [2020 07]**

I want to write about one phrase from a book: “All lives are equally grievable.”

We know what grieving is and what it feels like!

I had a Methodist colleague [John Kennedy] who years ago coined the phrase: “all people are proper people.” It was a way of saying “all lives matter.” It was a way of recognising those groups and communities in our nations who know that their lives matter [Black Lives Matter] in a system that works against them.

* Judith Butler writes: “Some lives are not considered grievable - The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the systemic disregard for the poor and dispossessed.”

Throughout the centuries people and churches have made all sorts of interpretations of ‘the Bible’ and of the Jesus of the Gospels. But I’ve always been compelled by the conviction that, at root, overwhelmingly, it is to do with “love God, love your neighbour, love your ‘self.’”

* As Luke Timothy Johnson has it: “[there are many NT passages whose] words bear no taint of evil, no stain of selfishness, and these are the words that the saints, through history and still today, turn to in support of their generous and world-enhancing lives.”

So, for whom do we grieve, for whom do we weep, for whom are we willing to ‘put ourselves at risk,’ so as to safeguard and defend?

If you want to discern what is right and wrong in human situations – in ‘the News’ – then use this check: ask, ‘who is doing the weeping?’ This viewpoint makes us able to feel the weight [the gravitas] of: “All lives are equally grievable.”

If we do this then we will seek to live in ways that put empathy, generosity, compassion, inclusiveness first. If we do this, we will be less self-excusing of our own ‘natural’ self-interest and ‘tribalism.’ If we do this, we will be more actively and politically critical of those whose lives and policies seek the opposite.

**End notes** [1] Judith Butler ‘The force of non-violence – an ethico-political bind’ [2020] – an academic book with many [for me] fresh insights. [2] Luke Timothy Johnson ‘The New Testament a very short introduction’ Oxford [2010] refers to: “Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount [Matthew 5-7], Paul’s Hymn of Love [1 Corinthians 13], the depiction of the first believers sharing all their possessions [Acts 4, 32-37], Jesus’ call to abandon everything and give everything away for the sake of the kingdom and for the sake of the world’s poor [Luke 12, 22-34 and 14,26-33].”

**Tony and Barbara Holden ‘Something has happened’ [2020 07]**

A group of us lived and worked for churches and community in the London Borough of Newham for many years – 30 years in Barbara’s case [1976-2006]. One or two remained. Paul Regan with his work for Citizens UK and Citizens London https://www.citizensuk.org/london and Colin and Judith Marchant who, in their age, have been living and engaging and recording the fast-moving changes. https://www.familytreeofnewham.org/view\_full\_story.php?story\_id=82

They wrote to us: “Yesterday we drove around a number of the churches in Newham. / All churches where I have preached or we have worshipped. Although it was mid-morning not a single door was open, no adverts of welcome and no sign of movement. But the streets were bustling, people were out and about. / Something has happened! We do get invited [by churches] to use Zoom or read notes and we have received visits from both Baptists and Anglicans but it feels as if a chapter has ended [2020 07].”

Behind the deep feelings elicited by the phrase ‘something has happened’ is a long-term faithfulness which still has the capacity to wonder about the future. It is a faithfulness which still has the energy to care about what happens next for church and community.

The phrase got us into identifying four actions that sustain our hopes for church and community.

[1] Relationships and power - this first one is to do with the people we have known through networks and worship and friendships and meetings and community action. Whatever the future brings we think that building and sustaining relationships is going to be a precious and key issue.

[2] Story-tellers - There will always be story-tellers. People will go on recording and bearing witness. No doubt the format will change yet again but the importance of reinterpreting the stories will not. We mean both the sacred texts and the stories from life.

[3] Life-choices - There will always be choices to be made. ‘Biblically’ “between life and death.” There are those who [in many different ways and with many different reasons] are committed to the common-good, to justice and peace, to ‘loving the neighbour.’ And there are those who, in manifold ways, think: “Some lives are not considered grievable - The reasons for this are many, and they include racism, xenophobia, homophobia, transphobia, misogyny and the systemic disregard for the poor and dispossessed [Judith Butler].”

[4] Unexpected allies - There will always be surprises and we think that the biggest surprise is to do with who become our allies. As Amartya Sen wrote: “The solitarist approach [defining a person as one thing or only by one category] is an excellent way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world.” For so long people have argued and fought about why they behave as they do – what you ‘have to believe’ in order to be allies - arguing no doubt that ‘there is only one way.” What we need is that all who share the vision of the common good [however variously expressed or ‘doctrinally’ based] work for the good, for kindness, for fairness, for peace and justice.

**Tony Holden ‘Reading the Gospels’ [2020 06]**

Barbara tells me the story of how, aged four or five, in her South Wales village, a near neighbour [the local journalist] said to her: “Can you read? No. Well, I will teach you.” And so, it began. I have no memory of learning to read – though I have done a lot of it: from five years in Universities; to editing and reviewing; to book groups in retirement; and my most recent ‘big read’ of Hilary Mantel ‘The mirror and the light [with its 883 numbered pages].

Jesus of the Gospels

If ever a story got layered with sacredness, authority and interpretations the story of the Jesus of the Gospels is one such. The retelling and acting out has happened, throughout the centuries and within different cultures, because the story is so significant for us.

“It has been perhaps the most thoroughgoing and sophisticated analysis of any set of texts in the history of human thought [Diarmaid MacCulloch ‘A History of Christianity 2009 page 83].”

Its importance lies in the central theme to do with Jesus’ life and teaching together with the descriptions of his last week, death and the witnesses to his resurrection. These are stories [books] that we have read and will read again and again.

**Re-reading**

I find re-reading any book a fascinating experience. During these months I’ve been picking-out some favourites. Sometimes we are pleased and a second or ‘close reading’ gives us new insights. Sometimes we are disappointed and wonder why it mattered to us so much when we first read it. Sometimes reading one book plunges us into many books by the same writer. So what of our re-reading of the Bible, the New Testament, the Gospels?

**Re-reading and memories**

When we yet again read the original texts [in English] memories crowd in – memories that are perhaps to do with academic work and studying; some that are very personal coming from particular moments in our Christian journey, some that are to do with belonging to a community of faith centred on friendship, ritual and worship. But the memories are of value when they enrich our understanding and encourage us to live the Christian life.

**Re-reading and new insights**

Many of us have been re-reading the Bible, New Testament, the Gospels over a lifetime – and you think, ‘wow’ [I promised myself I would never type ‘wow’!]. But it does continue to be engaging and life-forming. Why? Because – though Christians express these ideas in many different forms – our attraction to the narrative is all to do with Jesus being valued, archetypal, a catalyst for change, a way to liberation, a source of creativity and spirituality.

**Tony Holden ‘The rest is commentary’ [2020 05]**

“Once there was a gentile who came before Shammai, and said to him: ‘Convert me on the condition that you teach me the whole Torah while I stand on one foot.’ Shammai pushed him aside with the measuring stick he was holding. The same fellow came before Hillel, and Hillel converted him, saying: ‘That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it’ [Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 31a].”

Versions of this ‘Golden Rule’ feature in most religions and cultures.

The phrase ‘the rest is commentary’ might be read as a put down or as a very strong teaching-comment. It reminds me that actions come first then reflection and interpretation and commentary.

For the Jesus of the Gospels the ‘Golden Rule’ [of Leviticus 19,18] became: “Do to others as you would have them do to you [Luke 6,31] and “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets [Matthew 7,12].”

Several things stand out for me in this key-teaching -

**[1] It is a very straightforward and basic idea** – it’s not, as we say, ‘rocket science’ or [as we are learning to our cost] ‘virology.’ We really do know the difference between, let’s say, a kiss and a smack across the face or acts of kindness and acts of cruelty. Our individual values are interdependent with communal values. So that however we balance rights and responsibilities we know that our values are not absolutes for individuals but values to be worked out in community.

**[2] We need to address and focus on the action, the event, the main idea -** In the Gospels it is what Jesus is saying and doing. For part of most religions it is the Golden Rule. For us – for me – it means not being distracted by the noise of chatter and arguments but sticking with the words and deeds that are to do with love, care, compassion and forgiveness.

**[3] The tough one** – the serious difficulty for humans – is how we persuade individuals, leaders, groups [who do not share these values] to change. How do we check selfishness, greed, exploitation, violence? Throughout history the answer has all too often been through the use of power and violence. But there have always been those – Christians among them – who have stuck at [to borrow a phrase] ‘the main business.’ “Do to others as you would have them do to you” – do it, “the rest is commentary.”