

Learning From Others in Isolation

If, as seems likely, Christ Church will not be meeting for communal worship for some time, and that most of the members of CCSMURC will be maintaining some form of social distancing for the foreseeable future, can we learn from those past and present who live/d in social isolation through necessity or choice?

For some today - prisoners, researchers on the South Pole, visitors to the space station - the experience of living in lockdown is familiar. History provides numerous examples of people living in isolation, from lighthouse keepers maintaining a watchful eye over stormy seas, to anchorites/anchorites walled up in anchor-hold cells attached to churches throughout the UK and across Europe in the Middle Ages. For most of us, though, living in lockdown is new.

Isolation is a strange thing. It is used as a punishment - solitary confinement, house arrest - at the same time as people seek it out through retreats and wellness therapies. As a society, we value people who are gregarious and fun, but throughout history we have sought out those who live in isolation for wisdom and guidance.

Anchor-holds had at least 2 windows; one into the church, through which the altar could be seen and worship could be shared, at a distance, and one onto the street so that those needing spiritual guidance could consult the occupier. Life as a recluse, paradoxically, situated anchorites at the heart of their communities and could transform them into religious celebrities. Their cells often faced busy roads in bustling cities, they spoke with petitioners, granted indulgences, and sat at the centre of a subtle and complex web of obligations. They often doubled as a bank, teacher's cubicle, prayer box and storehouse of local gossip.

The most well-known anchorite is Julian of Norwich, who was confined in a cell attached to St Julian's Church in Norwich during the Middle Ages. Julian herself was familiar with plagues and pestilence - she was a child during the Black Death, and lived through a period where up to half of Norwich's population was killed by the disease. By removing herself from life, she would not only get a chance of preserving her own life, but also of finding calm and quiet and focus in a chaotic world. She gathered up in her heart all those who were ill or wretched, and, through compassion for them, held them up in her prayers, just as we remembered NHS workers for 10 weeks with our applause.

Perhaps self-isolation may be easier to bear if, instead of seeing it as a stretch of boring but comfy nights in, we recognise it as an unpleasant, stressful necessity, a time not merely to be endured or evaded, but engaged with: acknowledged and accommodated, mourned through. What if we see this time as an opportunity for accentuating the positive, while eliminating the negative - to misquote a song lyric? A chance to visualise all the people whose health we are protecting by staying home, not meeting for Bible Study in someone's front room, not holding a barbecue for the neighbours or meeting friends in the pub? Going out might be less stressful if we do the pavement slalom not out of fear of being infected by the person ahead of us or behind us, but out of respect for them, in case we are unknowingly infected and cause them harm.

Like an anchorite, we are at the moment part of the church, but distanced from it, our window on worship is a worship sheet, a Zoom service or a YouTube clip. We are part of the world, but distanced from it, hiding behind a mask, perhaps working from home, meeting friends on social media, by e-mail, telephone, or on Zoom, not able to travel far or go on holiday. Unlike an anchorite, who was in their cell for the rest of their lives, eventually our restrictions will ease, gradually and by degrees, until some new normality establishes itself.

Julian of Norwich's writing, and contemporary accounts of discussions that she had with various people, all point to her unfailing optimism in times of adversity and isolation - something that we could learn from her as Covid-19 lingers on in our lives. I leave you with two quotes from her:

“Christ did not say, ‘You shall not be perturbed, you shall not be troubled, you shall not be distressed,’ but He said, ‘You shall not be overcome.’”

“All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”

Roger Newton