

Reflection on Sunday 23 March 2025

by Maria Henriksson-Bell, Lay Leader of Worship



Do you remember where you were on this day, the 23rd of March 2020?

My family and I were, as we often are, listening to the radio. At 8 o'clock, life as we knew it changed. In a special Prime Ministerial broadcast, a great number of restrictions were announced in what we came to call lockdown.

Do you, perhaps, remember the time leading up to this date? Towards the end of 2019 there were reports of an alarming new virus outbreak in Asia, but we know now that at that stage it had already reached the UK. A close friend of mine was hospitalised with a mystery illness that left her gasping for breath and fighting for her life. She survived, but with significant trauma. The doctors didn't know then that they were dealing with Covid-19, but thankfully, praise God, she lived to tell the tale. I am not alone in being profoundly grateful for the dedication of medical staff, developments of vaccines and

treatment protocols that significantly improved chances of survival.

When writing this, I realised I have lost track of the timeline; I am no longer 100% sure of what happened in what order, which Sunday was our last together in church before we went into lockdown. I think it was the 15th of March, but don't quote me on that. The flowers for Mothering Sunday which fell on the 22nd had already been ordered, so we were invited to come to collect them during the week as we knew we would not be meeting the next Sunday.

St Andrew's was up and running again very soon after that, just not in person. Within a week or so, we had Sunday Zoom services followed by Meditation and Mindfulness on a Wednesday evening and Compline on a Sunday evening. Those are still running, by the way. If you need help accessing them, reach out to a member of the ministry team or Philippa, the Administrator (standrew.hertford@btinternet.com), at St Andrew's.

These online services proved helpful to many, and at the peak of use the Zoom congregation numbered in excess of 100 people. I am not alone in being impressed with all those involved and grateful for their service.

Zoom services weren't the only way we stayed in touch. People stayed in touch via messages, WhatsApp, FaceTime and emails. We got to know our neighbours. We exchanged contact details with people we had barely spoken to before and many of us who

were not in a high-risk category felt a new sense of duty towards the elderly and clinically vulnerable.

Despite all the ways I found to be of use (delivering food to a housebound family, checking in with elderly neighbours and leaving flowers on the doorstep of a vulnerable friend), I can't help but wonder: Who did I neglect? Was there anyone I should have helped but didn't? I am sure I am not alone in asking: Did I do enough?

That question is part of the confused guilt that many of us felt. We were all in the same storm, but we were not in the same boat.

Some of us were ok financially, others feared for their livelihood.

Some of us felt comparatively safe to go outside, others were isolating alone or with vulnerable family members.

Some of us liked our own company, others suffered with loneliness. Some of us did both.

I felt particularly for those who needed to hold down full-time jobs from home while also supporting their children's education. A tough gig.

In May 2020, I was invited to write some of the Thoughts for the Day that were sent out and, just as I was hoping for peace

and quiet to give it my best, our neighbour's ceiling sprang a leak. This ceiling sat beneath a tiled rooftop terrace and the noise of workmen trying to access and repair the damage with power tools was infernal. After three days of noise and vibrations I was exhausted, it really was that loud, but it must have been ten times worse from the perspective of the two neighbours affected; one looking down at a broken terrace, the other looking up at a hole in the ceiling. We were due heavy rain.

Pandemic life was often like that: exhausting, but probably worse for someone else. We tried hard to stay grateful and optimistic, to look for the silver lining, but there were days when there wasn't a silver lining. When you felt like you couldn't say a proper, dignified goodbye because you couldn't go to the funeral, because there was no funeral, there was no silver lining. Only a cloud. Clouds do clear. Eventually.

We did try to make the best of the situation, although sometimes with a nervous energy that in hindsight was a bit unhinged. I have mentioned before that I took up exercise. Most uncharacteristic. I can now also share that I did an inventory of all the pasta, rice, oats etc we had with a list of amounts. Not the cans and jars or food supplies in general, just the carbohydrates. It made no sense, and I can only presume I did it in an attempt at feeling in control of something. I didn't know when I would ever be able to see my mother again. I didn't know when I would next hug a beloved friend. I didn't know when life would be recognisable again, but I did know that at that point in life, on that day, I had 750g of rice in the cupboard.

Looking back stirs up a lot of feelings and memories. I know I am not alone in remembering a sense of injustice and righteous anger. Restrictions sometimes seemed arbitrary and were enforced unevenly. At one point, gathering in large numbers to watch a football match was allowed but not a socially distanced choir.

We cancelled our socially distanced outdoor picnic for home educated children and parents because we weren't certain of numbers and if we had exceeded 20 we would have risked thousands of pounds in fines. If, however, we had opted to go grouse shooting instead, we would have been ok. The rules allowed a party of 30 to go grouse shooting.

I know I am also not alone in feeling like for a while afterwards there was an expectation to have moved on. To some extent, I agree. A healthy mind doesn't dwell unduly on the pain of the past or old grudges, but, if we look to the Bible, we see that God very much cares about remembrance.

In the book of Leviticus, we can read about how God appointed weekly and yearly rhythms of remembrance for his people. God cares about us remembering. When Passover was celebrated, it wasn't just a celebration of freedom from slavery, it was also a commemoration of the bitter tears shed while in slavery.

It's right to remember and give thanks for the good times, but it is also wrong to forget things that were badly handled on a systematic level; what we thought was unfair and the fundamental societal inequalities highlighted by the pandemic, because if we forget we won't learn to do things better.

In a few minutes, the liturgy, the words we say during the service, will remind us that on the night he was betrayed, Christ broke bread, gave thanks and said, "Do this in remembrance of me." Before then, I want to remind you of something most of us felt like we had more of during the pandemic: Time.

I invite you to take some time to remember, with the help of some questions, then we'll finish by saying a few words of grace from 2 Corinthians 13:14 together.

What brought you joy during the pandemic?

What is your funniest memory from the pandemic?

What acts of kindness do you remember?

For what are you most grateful today?

If you are still sitting with some pain, or if it isn't easy to remember, please know you are not alone. Don't hesitate to reach out to someone you trust if you need to talk about things.

Let's say some words of Grace: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and evermore. Amen