Reflections • Friday 8 May 2020 • By Bishop Jeremy Greaves

What might be the invitation of the Spirit to you in these times?

A little over a hundred years ago, when the world was struggling to deal with the Spanish Flu, people were living with similar restrictions to those we are currently experiencing. People were unable to gather in schools, theatres, restaurants and churches, with people confined to their homes except for essential trips out.

In Brisbane, the telephone exchange shut down because there were not enough telephone operators untouched by the flu to keep things going – with people unable to make phone calls, they experienced isolation as never before.

In 1918, during the Spanish Flu period, The Rev'd S.O. Coxe, pastor of Handley Memorial Presbyterian Church, in Birmingham, Alabama, reflected on the need for a ban of public worship gatherings, writing that:

“But, while this providence is a severe one, affecting as it does all our plans and programs...may we not yet turn this season to best account by accepting it as an opportunity for the exercise of a fuller devotion to God and to the things of His Kingdom? Necessarily we shall be kept in our homes many hours that would otherwise be spent in recreation and amusement...And certainly if we should improve these hours by prayer and meditation, the seeming curse of this scourge would not be unmixed with blessing.”

The writer of the book of Revelation asked hearers to look around and see what was happening in their world and listen for the invitation of the Holy Spirit: “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.” (Revelation 3.22)

What might be the invitation of the Spirit to you in these times? It seems to me that one invitation could be to explore or re-engage with some of the practices that have always been part of being Christian, but which have been neglected over recent years, as gathering for Eucharist has been, for many of us, the only regular faith practice in which we engage.

Christianity has, from the very beginning, been as much about practice as it has been about belief, as Diana Butler Bass explains in Christianity After Religion:

“The early community that followed Jesus was a community of practice. Jesus's followers did not sit around a fire and listen to lectures on theology. They listened to stories that taught them how to act toward one another, what to do in the world. They healed people, offered hospitality, prayed together, challenged traditional practices and rituals, ministered to the sick, comforted the grieving, fasted and forgave. These actions included wonder, gave them courage, empowered hope, and opened up a new vision of God. By doing things together, they began to see differently... Jesus did not walk by the Sea of Galilee and shout to fishermen, “Have faith!” Instead, he asked them to do something: “Follow me.” When they followed, he gave them more things to do. At first he demonstrated what he wanted them to do. Then he did it with them. Finally, he sent them out to do it themselves, telling them to proclaim God's reign and cure the sick. When they returned from this first mission, they could not believe what had happened. They discovered that proclaiming the kingdom was not a matter of teaching doctrine; rather, the kingdom was a matter of imitating Jesus's actions.

At least one study from the US shows that there is a link between “personal spiritual practices” and congregational vitality, suggesting that the “more emphasis a congregation gives to the value of home and...
personal religious practices, the higher the congregation's vitality and the more likely it is to be growing in membership."

One of the practices that I have been quite intentional about re-engaging with over recent weeks is the practice of centering prayer. While using the Centering Prayer app helps, it has taken some discipline to make sure I spend 20 minutes at the beginning of the day in silence, before the Daily Office or before looking at any emails, but it has made a tremendous difference to my sense of being able to pray through this time. Of course, there are many other spiritual practices and individuals and groups will choose to explore different options.

Various writers have recognised three types of spiritual practices – those that are individual and ‘personal’, upon which the more public or ‘communal’ practices are based and designed to build community. These in turn yield ‘missional’ practices – practices we undertake as we engage in our Christian ministry with others.

The ‘personal’ disciplines we might explore during this time of physical distancing are regular (likely daily) practices in which we engage so that we may be able to express our faith communally out of deep inner conviction and passion, rather than out of duty, custom, or fear. These include: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study, Simplicity, Discernment, Pilgrimage, Forgiveness, Solitude, Submission and Honouring the body.

These might be good practices to explore until the time comes when we can gather together again and engage in more public or communal practices. A great place to begin exploring the practices of the faith might be the Spiritual Practices website.

But there are many other places to look and explore.

Sunday Devotions • Monday 18 May 2020 • By The Rev’d Paul Bland

Sunday Devotion: 24 May 2020, Seventh Sunday of Easter

Priorities in times of trial

Main Readings: Acts 1.6-14; Psalm 68.1-10, 32-35; 1 Peter 5; John 17.1-11

Supplementary Readings: Psalm 133; John 17.20-26; Acts 1.15-26; Psalm 68.11-20; Revelation 14.1-7; 15.2-4

‘Father, the hour has come...’ (John 17.1)

I sat once in a Bible Study and listened while a woman described how, as a child in Prussia in January 1945, her family loaded a baby pram with their most precious things and then set out to walk three hundred miles west over winter roads. They were fleeing oncoming Russian troops, hoping to reach the relative safety of British or American soldiers. “You have to think in moments like that what is really important,” she said.

Just before his arrest, Jesus spoke these words to his disciples: “Father, the hour has come.” In the drama that follows, Jesus shows us what is really important in times of trouble: the love of friends, courage in the face of suffering and faithfulness to the call of God. Few of us will be confronted with decisions such as those that the German girl and her family were called to make, but in the struggle this year with COVID-19’s challenges, all of us have had to rethink our priorities.

In our parish communities, we have been blessed to encounter the comfort of friends, a great deal of courage and a determination to negotiate the current challenges with faithfulness to God. Many of us have found unexpected blessings in these essential qualities.

May God continue to nurture that faithfulness when the hour of trial has passed.