

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

Consider the Dandelions...

Well, Jesus almost said that: 'See how the flowers of the field grow' (Matt 6:28). Whilst the words of the Authorised Version might be stored somewhere in the back of our minds: 'Consider the lilies of the field', most newer translations talk about wild flowers. And dandelions are wild flowers, are they not?

At the moment, considering the dandelions is not difficult. On our permitted walks they are everywhere - in uncut lawns, in grass verges, along footpaths and across our parks and open spaces. Nature's golden sunspots, brightening the greenness and painting pitches with yellow sparkliness.

Dandelions, we could say, are a bit like Marmite. You either love them or you hate them. If you're a child you think they are all things bright and beautiful, fun to play with by counting how many times you can blow on their seed heads before all the seeds are dispersed. If you are a gardener, the thought of anyone blowing dandelion seeds anywhere near your precious patch is horrifying, and your summer is spent waging war on any that appear in your lawn or flower beds.



What, you might ask, has all of this to do with life a couple of months into this strange, coronavirus dominated world we are inhabiting just now? At this point in time, consideration is being given to what happens with lockdown since the spread of the virus is, for now, being curtailed. At its start, perhaps we thought that there would be a few weeks of hardship and then things would get back to normal. We could just go back to the way things were and we could put all the discomfort behind us. But now realisation is dawning that the next stage will not be like that. Some sort of restriction is likely to be around for many months to come. And so simply longing for the return of the way things were will not help us in the present. The Bible has many instances of people looking back with longing, but I cannot think of any that are portrayed in a positive light. When Lot's wife looked back towards Sodom, she became a pillar of salt (Gen 19:26). The people of Israel longed to be back in Egypt when the harsh reality of life in the desert was hard to take (Ex 14:12) but all that did was to blind them to God's provision for their welfare and plans for a new home in a new land. God's people exiled in Babylon longed to be back in Jerusalem (Psalm 137:1), but God told them through the prophet Jeremiah to make themselves at home in their new place, seek its peace and love its people because they would not be returning home any time soon (Jer 29). It seems that looking back to the past only makes us miserable and doesn't help us to understand what God is doing for us and through us in the present, according to his plans and purposes for us in the future.

The alternative to longing to be back with the way things were is to learn to adjust to life as it is in the here and now, however strange, unsettling or uncomfortable it seems. There is something about developing inner resilience which equips us to be able not only to just about cope, but actually to flourish, grow and bear fruit in times of turbulence and change. In the run up to his death, Jesus talked about being the True Vine and his Father the Gardener who lavished care and attention on the vine in order for it to flourish and be fruitful. It gives a wonderful picture of God's care for us, and of our need to be grafted onto Christ our rootstock, but from the point of view of resilience, vines are a rubbish example. They need lots of sunshine, they don't cope with drought, and they are killed off by frosts. The reason we don't see our gardens full of them in the UK is that they can't cope with any but the most sheltered positions. So when Jesus wanted to talk to his followers about coping in worrying times, he didn't talk about vines, he talked about wild flowers.

So, let us consider the dandelions. They have no interest in being restricted to the sunniest, warmest, most comfortable, least challenging conditions. They are content to be blown where the wind takes them and put down roots on whatever

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patch of ground they land on. It doesn't matter if there is competition from other plants (a nice green lawn will do fine); it doesn't matter if it is a stony path; it doesn't matter if it doesn't rain for weeks or if there is so much rain the ground is water-logged; it doesn't even matter if someone comes along with a lawnmower and cuts off all their leaves and flowers. Dandelions are survivors. They have a stubborn determination to grow and thrive whatever challenges their environment throws at them. And how? Because of the quality of their roots. They grow thick tap roots which go deep into the ground giving them access to sources of nourishment deep beneath the surface, and which anchor them firmly so they withstand outside forces trying to dig them up. They invest as much growth in their hidden roots as in their flowers and leaves, providing them with the capacity to store water and nutrients and endure harsh times.

If we consider the dandelions, we will therefore find ourselves thinking about how we can benefit from adapting to our new unwelcome conditions. We will think about how we can not only just survive, but also grow and thrive in these strange times. We won't invest our attention and energy into hankering for what we have lost, but will focus on getting on with life and living in the present moment. We will put our energy into new growth - into flourishing in the new situation in which we find ourselves. We will put down roots reaching deep into Christ, so we grow in his love, know him more and are strengthened in faith (Eph 3:17-18, Col 2:6-7). We will use the extra time we have on our hands to be doing things which help deepen our relationship with Christ - by learning how to simply 'be' in God's presence and enjoy spending time with him, to reading his word and letting its meaning sink deeply into our hearts and change us from within, and to allowing that to inform our praying. We will not be ashamed to bloom brightly and be seen so that others can appreciate the beauty that comes through living in Christ. We will have confidence that no matter how tough life gets or whatever things come along which will attempt to stifle or uproot us, we will be able to hold fast and regrow. And we will develop the kind of faith that recognises that no matter where we find ourselves being blown to in the future, with Christ's help, we will be able to flourish and grow in that new place too.

Consider the dandelions. And let God teach you something about life; how to live; how to flourish; how to desire first and foremost the things of his kingdom.

Questions Read Matt 6:25-34. What is God saying to you about worrying about the future? What can you learn from the way he has made and ordered his creation, wild flowers in particular?

Do you find yourself longing to be back in the past? Notice how that makes you feel - sad or happy? Does it open or close your mind to God's plans and purposes for you? Ask God to show you how he is already using your present circumstances to help you grow.

Garden centres have shelves laden with products which are proven to stimulate root growth and plant health. Ask God to show you what will help you grow stronger roots and grow deeper into Christ.

Worry drains life out of us. It brings shadows rather than light into our days. Gratitude brings us life and joy. In Col 2:6-7 Paul links being rooted in Christ with being overflowing with thankfulness. What are the things that help you be thankful? Some people find keeping a gratitude journal helpful - both the routine of recording things they are thankful for and then having something to read through later on darker days. Might that be helpful for you, or what might you do as an alternative?

Another helpful practice can be doing a Review of the Day before bedtime. There are two parts to this. First you re-run the events of the day in your mind, noticing the things which gave you joy or hope or encouragement, and thank God for them. Next you think through your day and note the things which cast a shadow over it, that drained life rather than enhanced it, which brought sorrow or longing. You then talk about these things to God and ask him to help you understand how you are to respond. Over time, this practice can help build our resilience as we learn the things which enhance and those which drain our life. It conditions us to learn to focus on doing things that bring us life and joy, and to steer away from ways of thinking or doing which suck away our life and joy. It can also help us sleep more peacefully at night.

Growth is something that is easy to miss on a daily basis. Each day our walks may look exactly the same but if we compare photos taken today from a fortnight ago we will see everything is greener, the trees are more fuller, the shade is less dappled and more blossom is out. What can you do to help you notice how God is helping you grow? Could you write in a journal, make notes in a diary, keep a list of bible passages which have spoken loudly to you, or something else? The more we do this, the more we will realise not only how we are to live in the present, but also who God is helping us become for the future.

Spend time talking to God about your worries and cares, fears and doubts. Be honest. Place yourself fully in his care, knowing that he loves you through and through and always wants the best for you. Then thank him for this time and the things he has shown you.. **See this link to Gerard Kelly's poem** <https://m.facebook.com/gerardk6>