

Resources for Churches...

Responding to the Coronavirus

Road Ahead Closed

Living 250 miles away from a terminally ill parent meant we were inevitably bound to spend considerably more of our time on journeys than we had done before.

The route, to be precise, was the M25, M40, M42, M6 and M55. And during such journeys there was always a fair chance that we would meet some sort of delay, if not two, three or occasionally more. The worst ones were when the motorway was fully closed off and we were forced to abandon our route and find an alternative. These detours would inevitably be longer, slower and unfamiliar. Some had particular pressures - such as the journey home

when we had a call to say our Sainsbury's delivery man had arrived early and was sitting on our driveway while we were still wending our way through rural Oxfordshire! The best were where we simply accepted the situation, made the most of the new route, and discovered unexpected places to explore and enjoy on the way.

So in one sense there has been a certain familiarity in our experience of the last couple of months. Our anticipated route ahead was coned off and the instructions were to take a diversion. Almost immediately came the feeling of uncertainty, of loss of direction, of being somewhere strange, of feeling we were going nowhere, being victims of circumstance, unable to change things. And with this a sense of frustration and anxiety, of urgency to get back to the route we had been on, and of deep longing just to be home.

We get the impression that for Jesus accepting the journey as it turned out was part and parcel of life. Yes, there were plans and anticipated destinations, but if a crowd turned up looking for healing and needed feeding, you didn't just plough on regardless (Matt 14:13-21). If someone wanted you to heal their dying daughter and then there was another distraction on the way, that wasn't something that spoiled everything, it was an opportunity to be embraced and used for God's glory (Mark 5:21-43). If you had to hang around because shopping for lunch was taking a long time, an unanticipated conversation could unfold with life-changing consequences (John 4:3-42). How often in these cases also, do we find the disciples having a different agenda and misunderstanding what Jesus was up to, but through them then learning new lessons and get to know Jesus more?

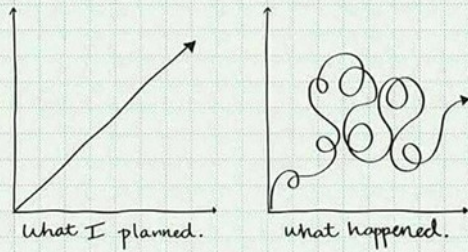
Just because our journey is now including a diversion from the route we anticipated, and we now have a feeling of uncertainty, anxiety, and frustration that things are taking a lot longer than we would like, that doesn't mean that we aren't in the place God wants us to be right now and that he can't bring good through it. In fact, things are just the opposite. Many of us already have stories of people we have got to know for the first time through lockdown, and of neighbours with whom we have had the opportunity to talk for the first time about life, where God is in all this and where we can find hope. We have been able to offer to pray for people's concerns and we are sharing more deeply with one another and praying with one another more. And maybe this is only the beginning.



Resources for Churches...

...continued

Life



When Paul writes to the believers in Rome and tells them 'We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him' (Rom 8:28) he is not promising a predictable life free of trouble, challenges and struggles, he is assuring them that even when we go through these things and worse, God still works for good. Yes, we would like this to be over. We would like to be out the other side and the road ahead clear before us. We would like the pain and suffering of those directly involved in the crash not to be happening. But for now, the best we can do is to accept the situation, to recognise that in life there is a time for everything and that includes times when we seem to be going nowhere. We can seek to make the most of the new unexpected places we find ourselves in. We can look around us for where and with whom we are to stop and hang around for a while, and in so doing discover joy and hope and blessing and become bearers of that blessing to others.

For further reflection there are a number of stories of people who were imprisoned to choose from. Perhaps the story of Joseph has the most connection with our situation - his life had a sudden diversion from its anticipated course, he unexpectedly found himself in new, strange surroundings, far away from his family and friends, and then later, when he had found his feet, life suddenly changes again and he finds himself in prison through no fault of his own.

Read Joseph's story in Genesis 37 and from 39 onwards.

Notice the repeated statement in chapter 39 that God was with Joseph. In what ways are you noticing God reminding you that he is with you on this new journey?

The striking similarity with what Paul says in Rom 8:28 comes following Jacob's death in Gen 50:20. Despite all he has gone through, Joseph is able to say 'God intended it for good.' What are the good things you can already see emerging out of this time of sudden change in our lives?

We are all products of the environment in which we were brought up - for good and bad. Jacob's family was a dysfunctional one in which favouritism bred sibling rivalry, jealousy and hatred. Joseph had been conditioned to think of himself as the favourite, deserving of special treatment, somehow more important than any of his brothers - evident in the manner in which he described his dreams to them. How would you describe him - spoilt, arrogant, or something else?

What godly qualities do we see develop and grow in Joseph during his time of imprisonment?

What are the attitudes and traits in us which God might be using our time of restriction and isolation to eliminate as he remoulds our character in accordance with his?

Temptation comes in many forms. What helps us deal with the temptations we face?

Are there temptations arising out of this time of lockdown which we need to run away from?

Joseph thinks his time of imprisonment is nearing an end but then finds it extended by a further two years. What do we find in Joseph's story which will help us to persevere and maintain hope if our period of restriction carries on much longer than we anticipate?

Joseph was dealt a raw deal but he did not harbour grievances against his brothers or against God. We can see something similar in the life of Nelson Mandela - what emerged from his time of imprisonment was also a generosity of spirit and a life characterised by compassion and forgiveness and the working for reconciliation.

Ask God to show you what fruit of the Spirit he wants to grow in your life at this time.

God worked through Joseph to bring his blessing to others.

Ask him to show you how and to whom he wants you to bring his blessing.

Spend some time sitting quietly in God's presence, inviting him to use your imagination to reveal to you how he intends to use this time of restriction and isolation for good.