

Tuckingmill Baptist Church, Camborne



July 2021

So we have entered the month in which it seems, at long last, that the Coronavirus restrictions will finally be fully lifted.

Although the number of new infections is increasing rapidly once again, the number of daily deaths attributed to the virus remains low. It really does seem as if the linkage between infection and death has almost been severed.

I haven't seen any analysis coding outcomes by age or by vaccination status - and I start to wonder whether these data are being suppressed - but the figures we are being fed, and the noises from No 10 seem to show that we are very nearly out of these woods. It does look as if nearly all future infections - unless a new and more dangerous variant arises which our current vaccines can't handle - will be no worse

than the annual flu that we have become accustomed to living with.

All of which probably means that it won't be so long until the politicians face months and years of enquiries about the handling of the national response to COVID-19.

The party political blame game will undoubtedly kick off again. But the only question really worth their asking is: *what have we learned?*



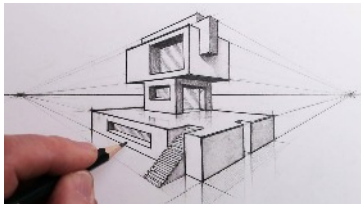
And that is what I'd like to think through for a moment here, too. I'm starting to write this before the Church Members' Meeting when we will be deciding what our "new normal" will look like. It could be that we will change very little, once this year and a half is behind us. What would be far sadder is if, as a result of this time, we had *learned* very little.

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So then, pause for a moment, instead of just reading on immediately. Reflect: what have you learned, or do you now understand somewhat better?

First, hasn't it got to be that **our God still reigns**? People have still been saved, during the pandemic. The church has not crumbled under the shock. And our God is still "abundant in steadfast love". Think how much more difficult this would all have been a mere 20 years earlier, when a vaccine might have taken years to develop, and nobody had even considered "binge-watching", with the Internet still largely in its infancy.

Indeed, we may have realised somewhat more the meaning of the hymn that says, "*Crown him the Lord of years*", with a bigger **sense of perspective**. We might



think that our age is unique and unlike any other, but we've been forced back to our history books to put COVID-19 alongside previous far more devastating pandemics: influenza, following the First World War, and the Black Death in the Middle Ages.

But certainly we have been forced to recognise the **fragility of**

life and society. We have always known - but just largely tried to ignore - that even the healthiest people can be "here today and gone tomorrow". In this last year, we have had to face that challenging fact as individuals. And society has had to admit that one single viral mutation in the wrong place and at the wrong time, and the whole globe is knocked off its track. Goodness knows who has been lending all this money that we hear the nation has been borrowing, but we will be paying it back for decades to come. And we are a wealthy nation; think of how this will continue to cause turmoil in less developed and less resilient places!

But, thinking more personally now, we have learned that **we can change**. We *can* do things differently. Of course our going online to "do Church" has had drawbacks. It's not the same as meeting in person, but it was something that we have now quite settled into. In fact, getting back into the building could seem a bit of an effort again now: getting up earlier ... getting *dressed*, even ... on a Sunday morning; dishes to wash after cafe church; church rotas ... church *cleaning*, this week? Again? Already?

But people have learned that they *can* receive e-mails, and even send them back with attachments. We *can* phone people instead of waiting to speak to them in person. We *can* save quite a lot of time with these digital technologies.

We *can* find some superb new songs to share online. We *can* still worship God despite being required to sit in silence wearing masks, simply ...

*making melody to the Lord
with your heart*
Ephesians 5:19

We might even have learned to sing out loud at home!

One way or another, though, I hope we have finally learned that **meeting together in church** (as we had done for years) **is actually a huge blessing**. Perhaps this absence *will* make the heart grow fonder!



And finally, it seems to me, as we now have this option to totally re-work our Church programme from scratch: **choices require grace and wisdom**.

In one way, Locking Down was easy. It was an emergency, and options were suddenly limited. I just had to call the shots: it's *Zoom*, it's 10.30, and so on. Things didn't work perfectly first time, but we all knew that we were scrabbling together what we could. There was no point in complaining. We were in

uncharted territory, and anyone was welcome to contribute any better ideas.

Now we have to choose which activities we take out of suspended animation, and just how we place them onto the chessboard of the church's weekly or monthly diary. People have preferences, some of which appear to others as simply unexamined gut feelings rather than considered necessities. Basically, it is far easier to fall out.

But isn't this similar to the Christian life *under grace* more generally? It *could* be seen as far easier to just have a system of rules about what is permissible and what isn't, what is ordained and what is forbidden. Oh, the wonders of the simplicity of black and white!

Yes, there *are* some rules like that for us as believers. We're currently looking at those "*Do not*'s" of the Ten Commandments. But there are other things that are far more vague, and need to be considered by each individual believer separately. Even in those Ten Commandments there is that one about "honouring" parents. That *has* to be about the heart, rather than just a tick-list of actions.

So precisely how we will find ourselves "doing church", come September, it will please some people more than others.

The Bible doesn't specify what meetings we're obliged to put on, or the minimum acceptable at-

tendance time each week. Instead, we're told to think relationally. How can we "stir up one another to love and good works" (Hebrews 10:24)? How are we to

Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!
Psalm 133:1



grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ?
2 Peter 3:18

That takes grace and wisdom - and the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, ...

the Son of Man [who] came not to be served but to serve
Matthew 20:28

And we are reminded of God's promised blessing - "life for evermore" - in not a regime but a relationship:

So if you don't get *your* preferred options for September ... *what would Jesus do?*

Peter Ham

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Church **website**:
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Zoom meetings - "online church":
maintaining the times we have become used to over the previous months,
but with increasing numbers of people meeting at the chapel in the mornings:
Sundays, 10.30 and 6.30

	10.30 a.m.	6.30 p.m. (cafe church)
11 th July	Exodus 20:15	following on from a.m.
18 th July	Exodus 20:16	following on from a.m.
25 th July	Exodus 20:17	following on from a.m.
1 st August	Virtual visits: Philippi	video / led discussion

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His Ways Are Not Your Ways

Expectations vs. Reality

(adapted from *Gentle and Lowly: The Heart of Christ for Sinners and Sufferers*, by Dane C. Ortlund)



We tend to project our natural expectations about who God is onto him instead of fighting to let the Bible surprise us into what God himself says. Perhaps nowhere in the Bible is that point made more clearly than in Isaiah 55. “There is nothing that troubles our consciences more,” said John Calvin on this passage, “than when we think that God is like ourselves.”

When life takes a difficult turn, Christians often remind others, with a shrug, “*His ways are not our ways*” — communicating the mysteries of divine providence by which he orchestrates events in

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ways that surprise us. The mysterious depth of divine providence is, of course, a precious biblical truth. But the passage in which we find “*his ways are not our ways*” comes from Isaiah 55. And in context, it means something quite different. It is a statement not of the surprise of God’s mysterious providence but of the surprise of God’s compassionate heart. The full passage goes like this:

*Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call upon him while he is near;
let the wicked forsake his way,
and the unrighteous man his thoughts;*

*Let him return to the Lord,
that he may have compassion on him,
and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.*

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.*

(Isaiah 55:6–9)

The first part of this passage tells us what to do. The second part tells us why. The transition comes toward the end of verse 7 (which concludes, “*for he will abundantly pardon*”). But notice the exact line of reasoning.

God calls us to seek him, to call on him, and invites even the wicked to return to the Lord. What will happen when we do this? God will “*have compassion on*” us (v7). The parallelism of Hebrew poetry then gives us another way of saying that God will exercise compassion toward us: “*He will abundantly pardon*” (v7). This is profound consolation for us as we find ourselves time and again wandering away from the Father, looking for soul calm anywhere but in his embrace and instruction. Returning to God in fresh contrition, however ashamed and disgusted with ourselves, he will not tepidly pardon. He will abundantly pardon. He does not merely accept us. He sweeps us up in his arms again.



New Eyes



But notice what the text then does. Verses 8 and 9 take us deeper into this compassion and abundant pardon. Verse 7 has told us what God does; verses 8 and 9 tell us who he is. Or to put it differently, God knows that even when we hear of his compassionate pardon, we latch on to that promise with a diminished view of the heart from which that compassionate pardon flows. This is why the Lord continues:

*For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways, declares the Lord.
For as high as the heavens are above the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
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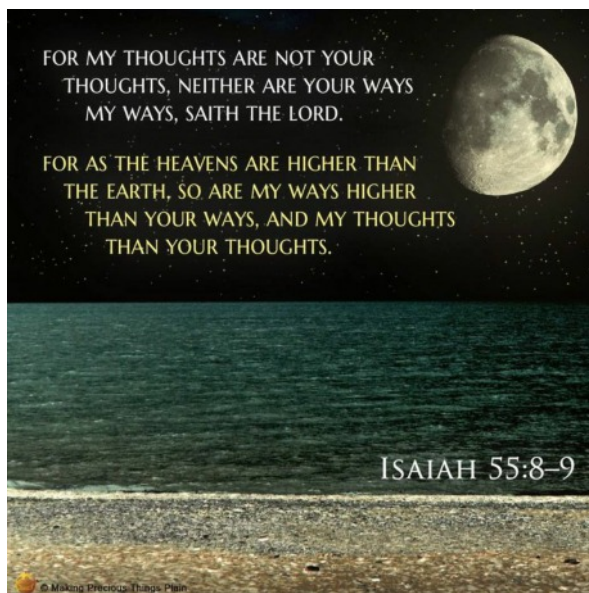
What is God saying? He is telling us that we cannot view his expressions of his mercy with our old eyes. Our very view of God must change. What would we say to a seven-year-old who, upon being given a birthday gift by his loving father, immediately scrambled to reach for his piggy bank to try to pay his dad back? How painful to a father's heart. That child needs to change his very view of who his father is and what his father delights to do.



The natural flow of the fallen human heart is toward reciprocity, tit-for-tat pay-back, equanimity, balancing of the scales. We are far more intractably law-ish than we realize. There is something healthy and glorious buried in that impulse, of course — made in God's own image, we desire order and fairness rather than chaos. But that impulse, like every part of us, has been diseased by the ruinous fall into sin.

Our capacity to apprehend the heart of God has gone into meltdown. We are left with an impoverished view of how he feels about his people, an impoverished view that (once more, due to sin) thinks it is in fact an expansive and accurate view of who he is — like a

grandson who, shown a crisp one-hundred-dollar bill, concludes that his grandfather must be very wealthy, not knowing the billions in real estate of which that gift is just the tiniest reflection. So God tells us in plain terms how tiny our natural views of his heart are. His thoughts are not our thoughts. His ways are not our ways.



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