

Since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. We do not lose heart. Good for Paul. But what if we do? What if mood or circumstance or experience close down our horizons and dim the lights of love and vocation. What if the exigencies of the last year have ground us down and diluted our confidence? What if we are no longer sure how to do our ministry when the ground has moved and the familiar ways don't work any longer? Do we carry on pretending, in the hope that things will improve, or that my mood will change when the sun comes out and the trees begin to blossom, or that God will do a miracle and transform my personality and make everything okay again.

I do remember when I was younger thinking this is exactly what God had done to me but it turned out actually to be the steroids!

Well, I recently had a conversation with someone I hadn't met before, who challenged my contention that what we need in these strange and testing times is hope but not optimism. Optimism assumes that things will get better, often despite all the evidence, whereas hope draws us through the reality, however good or bad that reality might actually prove to be. I think the challenge was around whether that hope ought to be showing a bit more brightness - that is optimism - an upbeat vision for the future. I'll return to this shortly but it's a challenge I've thought about a lot since that conversation.

Because I think this goes to the heart of where we are as a church, and as clergy and lay leaders, emerging from a dreadful year of lockdowns, isolation, tragedies, and loss.

Without warning we have had to adapt practices, invent new rituals, create community using unfamiliar media, try to shape a changed workload, especially when the normal means for exercising pastoral care have collapsed. It's reminded me of my feeling as a parish priest that if I were to have a slogan or motto, it would be in three foot high letters around my study wall and would say, confidently: 'everything you do is wrong'.

I wasn't being miserable, it's just that if I visited one person, then I wasn't visiting a couple of hundred others, and to someone's mind I will have made the wrong choice. In ministry we get used to having to set priorities in pastoral care that might always prove, in the end, to have been the wrong ones but we get on with the job anyway despite a lack of certainty regarding our choices. And this last year has demanded of our churches and ministers an exhausting willingness to change: innovate, limit, and expand, and all without any certainty that we are in fact getting it right.

Did some of us feel overwhelmed by the new demands? Yes. Did others among us look at our neighbours creative enthusiasms and feel inadequate, not least technologically? Certainly. Did some use lockdowns as an excuse for laziness? Possibly. Did others become manically activist and hide the fear behind new initiatives or organisation? Probably. Did some feel paralyzed by insecurity or dread of being seen to fail? Inevitably. And did some look at their neighbours weakness and compare themselves accordingly? Maybe.

And that is all okay. If that complex of reactions is the reality then that's what we will deal with. But how might we think about all of this, on this day, as we sit with Jesus and his

friends as they rehearse their foundational story and celebrate the liberation of God's people in the exodus.

How are we to think about our re-commitment to our vows, as ordained clergy, or our commissioning as lay leaders and disciples of this same Jesus.

And I ask these questions conscious of the fact that we are part of a worldwide church, where in very different circumstances similar services will be happening: in Sudan, in Tanzania, in Sri Lanka, in Pakistan, in the United States, in Germany, and Sweden, where our links are particularly strong, but the contexts are different.

Well in our gospel reading from Luke:22, Jesus has come with his friends to celebrate the Passover meal. Their minds are full of hope that the liberation of God's people celebrated in this meal might now, this year, be incarnated afresh as Jesus leads the expulsion of the Roman blasphemers, heralding the return of God among them.

They've been praying for several hundred years for this moment, repeatedly being let down by would-be messiahs who promised much but always delivered only disillusionment.

Yet now, what Jesus had spoken of as the Kingdom of God, was imminent, something to be anticipated. And spirits are high: read the text. Yet here in this upper room Jesus is surrounded by people who have missed the point and argue about their status. For one of them – Judas - Jesus is not going about things in the right way, and his hand is going to have to be forced. No doubting Judas's passion for the kingdom of God or his personal commitment to seeing it realised.

Another of them has a self-image that is illusory, and deceptive. Peter might think he's made of granite, who will soon discover that his rock is actually leaky limestone.

Betrayal, denial, illusion, optimism: all are there in that room. But you know what? It's the loneliness of Jesus that gets me.

Yet what Jesus does is take a longer-term view. He reframes the story of Israel's liberation, knowing that his friends don't quite get it. Broken bread and wine outpoured will one day make a different sense for them, but not just now. But Jesus isn't trapped in the now to the extent that he can't see the way forward. He knows also that things said and done now will, when circumstances have changed, complete a picture. It's a bit like when you look at one of those, some of those old 3D images that look like a mess until your eyes refocus and you suddenly see the dinosaur looking out at you.

In other words, and translating this to our context, being a minister or leader, in the name and image of the Christ whose name we bear, means seeing beyond the moment, looking into an uncertain future, but knowing that retelling the story, reframing the narrative, adding different colours to the picture, might only make sense later. Our job is to look further, and deeper, and tell the truth that goes beyond fear.

Terry Eagleton, the Roman Catholic, Marxist philosopher, literary theorist, and theologian - there's a CV for you - in his book 'Hope Without Optimism' quotes Saint Augustine as

follows: “there is no love without hope; no hope without love; and neither hope, nor love, without faith”.

You see the point? We articulate hope because we love the people we serve, and we do all this in faith because the world is uncertain, and people, frankly, are a mystery.

At this Passover meal Jesus strips everything back to its essentials, conscious of the contradictions and limitations of the people with him. Then he goes out to pray, as events take their tragic course, which suggests that our task is also to articulate the heart of the gospel, expose ourselves in prayer to the God who has no illusions about the nature of the rock from which we are hewn, and then face events with faith, and love, and courage, even with hope. And this is why in his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul can confidently urge the Christians in Corinth to hold mercy and encouragement together.

He writes in chapter 4 verse 1, since it is by God's mercy, that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

We will not be discouraged, because each of us knows that our ministry is rooted in the mercy of the God who knows us, and that this mercy has to be experienced before it can be shared.

And what is this ministry which Paul writes so passionately? Well he speaks in the previous chapter - chapter 2 - of proclaiming the good news of Christ. He goes on to tell us that we are the “aroma of Christ to God”; we are a letter to be known and read by all ministers of a new covenant, not of letter, but of spirit, as he says in chapter three verse six.

Now this vocation has not changed from Corinth to now. Paul writes passionately about his sufferings and he chides the Corinthians for their fickleness, desertion and easy, distraction. In other words he walks in the shoes of the Jesus he serves, in being surrounded by people like you, and me, and Judas, and Peter, and all the rest of them. His world is also one of uncertainty and fear. His own mortality was ever before him and he demonstrates in this painful letter the real impact on himself of the pressure to adapt, innovate, move on, and drive mission, despite the poverty of the tools he had to implement his task.

Does this sound familiar? It should do.

As Paul goes on to note the treasure of the glory of God - remember rooted in the mercy of God - is contained in clay jars.

After this last year we need no reminder of our limitations and fragilities, but we also find ourselves re-orientated towards the glory, rather than the clay. We fix our eyes on the glory of God and the promise of the good news of Jesus Christ, empowered by that same spirit that breathes, and blows, through the chaos of creation, bringing order and life.

A spring has brought sunshine and warmth, well for a couple of days anyway, and as restrictions have been relaxed and people have congregated in parks to leave their rubbish in heaps, people in our communities are grasping at optimism, and cheerfulness. The vaccines are working their scientific magic, and people are booking holidays in the summer. The world feels a bit brighter, and shouldn't we all be joining in, and talking it up?

Well, maybe, but for us as clergy and lay leaders, all of us followers of the Jesus who went to a cross and bore the wound marks in his resurrected body, we are called to a deeper task: to be both realistic, and hopeful; courageous and cautious; and to navigate the changing territory with faith, hope, and love. If everything opens up, we will not aim simply to go back to how it was in early 2020, and if we face further lockdowns, we won't be knocked off course but will adapt again, for our vocation is not to tick boxes or hibernate until the normal resumes, but rather to navigate reality and create new norms: ones of faith, and hope, and love, whatever the circumstances that shape our everyday.

I guess that what I'm commending is what Walter Brueggemann calls a return to the land of promise that will be ordered, organised, and lived out in freshly faithful ways.

Freshly faithful, among a people whose strength lies in what the Czech philosopher Jan Patočka called, the solidarity of the broken.

This is why we now need to open our churches, and consider how they can be a locus of hope and joy for our communities, not just our congregations.

The need for joyful evangelism has never been greater. One day soon we shall be able to sing again, and when we do we need to offer vocabularies for all the questions, lamentations, hopes and fears, aspirations, meditations, that lead us to open our hearts and voices to the God of mercy who has engaged *us* in this ministry.

So let me say this: thank you for all your service in the last year; thank you for being colleagues, and not competitors - the very message Jesus was trying to get through the skulls of his friends.

Thank you for your patience and long suffering. Thank you for ordering pastoral care and for kindling the flames of theological and spiritual hope. Thank you for praying, when words have failed. For burying the dead when you couldn't do justice to the bereaved. For living with criticism and a sense of failure sometimes, but with conviction and determination.

Thank you for keeping people connected, for sacrificing much in order to love your neighbour through this curse of a public health disaster.

Thank you for holding out a confident joy, in times of stress, and struggle.

We're not out of the woods yet, but when we do finally emerge, the world, and the church, will be different, and this is a glorious opportunity to take stock, to let go, to newly embrace, to innovate, negotiate, navigate, and shape a different future. This is our vocation now, and we are in it together: no shame, no fear.

For since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart.

Whereas John bell put it in a song, I quoted at this service in 2019, the last time we met together in one place, sing my soul when light seems darkest; sing when night refuses rest; sing though death should mock the future; what's to come, by God, is blessed. Amen.