

All together in one place

"When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place."

What a perfect reading for today when we are at last gathered back in St Andrews. Because here we are together in one place for the first time in nine weeks

At least some of us are together. Others have been unable to join us because of uncertainty or anxiety at another sudden change. Or because they are away on this long weekend reconnecting with relatives or friends out of Wellington.

And then there are the others. The people who are not regular parts of our community, but have been joining us in online gatherings during the lockdown. I know a few people of a variety of beliefs in Australia, the UK and Belgium who have enjoyed our You Tube services.

And even those of us who are here today are separated from one another by at least one metre. We couldn't greet each other after a long absence with a hug or a kiss, we cannot pass the peace in the way we're accustomed to. At morning tea, we can't mingle - we'll be seated at tables appropriately distanced. We can't even sing in full voice during the service!

We'll hum or sing quietly, or enjoy the music, watching the words on the screen. And we're doing all this, following St Andrews required health and safety plan, in love towards each other and our fellow citizens - physical distancing is an act of love to keep us all safe by limiting transmission of the virus.

For some people, Covid-19 has created space from work, from colleagues and workplaces. For others, it has created permanent space from jobs - around 230,000 New Zealanders have lost their jobs because of the pandemic.

And more job losses are anticipated. My son in Melbourne has been made redundant. Tom, who so generously has edited our You Tube services during lockdown, lost his job last week as a result of the pandemic.

And then there's that tragic permanent space between loved ones when someone dies. We have been fortunate in Aotearoa New Zealand that our government acted fast and hard but still, 22 people have died of Covid-19. That's 22 families and collections of friends who are grieving.

Others have died during this time of other causes, usually without family or friends present because of the restrictions to prevent transmission and keep us safe. Families and whanau have been unable to

farewell their loved ones in the usual ways through tangihana or funerals, affecting their grieving processes and leaving people bereft.

My memories of the lockdown will be the spaces between my family and me. All four children overseas, and wondering when we will see them again. And the spaces between friends and me. Friends who, during the lockdown, have had diagnoses of serious illness, begun chemotherapy, had new grandchildren born who they have been unable to visit.

There is always some space or distance between us. In any circumstance. There is always that gap between the other and me that may never be fully closed, no matter how close we are to another human being. But the pandemic has exacerbated and exaggerated that, made it more real than ever in our lives.

I've been thinking about this during the week, about the forced distances or space between people because of Covid-19, the uncertainty of the time, and the promises of this week's Bible readings. Of course, some people have enjoyed the space and I suppose if you've been with your family and had more time for each other, it might have been a lovely time. But for many people it has meant and still means

enforced separations, job losses, reduced incomes.

I've been wondering how those of who have found it difficult to live in these separated spaces have managed? And how we, as progressive Christians, who may not accept the biblical God of unfulfilled promises, channel our hope or despair? How do we pray if we no longer believe in a being to whom we might pray? Do we pray?

How do we live with that? Jewish theologian Martin Buber, whose thinking strongly influenced contemporary theology, wrote of the I-thou relationship.

He suggested that we, as humans, only exist in dialogue with others, that the very nature of our humanity is this two-way relationship.

But that's all very well, I hear you say, how do we live in practice with the space between us, especially at those times that we feel it acutely.

And how do we live in this extraordinary in-between time separate from so many whom we love? New Zealand appears to have been successful at eliminating Covid-19 but most other countries in the world have not. What does this mean for us while we wait and watch and long to visit loved ones in countries still struggling with the virus?

Once upon a time I would have prayed and found that helpful. I know that St Andrews is a mix of people with a mix of theologies with a range of responses to the idea of prayer.

I read recently about a former Christian rockstar who talked about no longer believing in God. He said: "It didn't happen overnight or all of a sudden. It's been more like pulling on the threads of a sweater, and one day discovering that there was no more sweater left."

If some of us have experienced similar and our beliefs have unravelled, are no longer theists, if we do not believe in a god 'out there' or even as some people put it 'a god within', how do we find the support and nurture and security once offered us by the notion of the God we hear about in the Jewish and Christian bibles? What to do in that moment when in the past, we would pray "God help me" or "God help my loved one" or "loving God, hold so-and-so close in their time of need"?

Today's Bible readings don't provide clues to answer my prayer question, but I think they do provide clues for how to live in these difficult spaces.

In Psalm 104, the longest creation poem, "the psalmist surveys creation and names

it all: the heavens and the earth, the waters and springs and streams and trees and birds and goats and wine and oil and bread and people and lions.”¹ He or she describes nature and nourishment – oil and bread – and us – people. During the lockdown, apparently, more people than usual got out and enjoyed nature.

In Aotearoa New Zealand many of us are blessed with beautiful nature nearby. Psychological studies show that getting out in nature improves emotional mood, makes us feel better, even helps memory. So nature is one way we might find nurture during difficult times, and find meaning in our lives. And bread features in the Psalm! Many people took to baking bread and found pleasure in their own creation.

Then there is the Acts reading: it is full of fantastical images – rushing wind and tongues of fire, people speaking in other languages. I love the images but like the signs in the Gospel of John, these are not to be read literally. To do so can distract from our roles in the world. What if the lines “your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions” refers to us, spotlights our

¹ Walter Brueggemann, “The liturgy of abundance, the myth of scarcity” in *The Christian Century*, 24 March 1999, <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-01/liturgy-abundance-myth-scarcity> accessed 22 May 2020.

roles or callings as followers of Jesus to make the world a better place?

The final verses of the Acts reading contain the promise that "everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved."

So all readings provide promise of God's saving action. The Psalm expounds on human reliance on God to answer their pleas. And in the reading from John's gospel, Jesus invites all who are thirsty and believe in him to come forth and drink. There is an implicit promise in that.

These are huge promises, and they may provide comfort to the theists among us. But what of those who are non-theist but are in the church because of our commitment to the social justice gospel of Jesus of Nazareth? Or because we enjoy the community?

How do we respond then? How do we live in the spaces, the unsettling, in-between places? The spaces between belief and unbelief, or belief and doubt?

I think that's where we all come in. Our humanity. Compassion. It's where communities play a part. We live with each other. We live in gratitude for our communities, for the people who love us and for the beauty of nature. That's not

to say we don't acknowledge the hard stuff, the inequality Max Rashbrooke spoke of last week, or the difficult times in our lives - the separation from our loved ones, illness, death, injustice. That's all very real. Too real and too painful at times.

We can over-complicate things. I certainly can. I'm a chronic over thinker. It's an exhausting way to live. Mary Oliver's poem is a plea to keep things simple.

I'm going to read it again.

*It doesn't have to be
the blue iris, it could be
weeds in a vacant lot, or a few
small stones; just
pay attention, then patch*

*a few words together and don't try
to make them elaborate, this isn't
a contest but the doorway*

*into thanks, and a silence in which
another voice may speak.*

What I take from this is that whether it's a form of prayer or acknowledgement of gratitude to someone, it need not be a grand gesture. Words of thanks to the bus drivers who have carried us, supermarket workers and delivery drivers who have kept us fed, medics who have cared for us,

friends and family who have sustained us.
Kind words with friends we've been parted
from.

Maybe that's how we can live in these in-
between, distanced spaces and maybe that's
what prayer can be - living in community,
seeing the other, acknowledging them,
valuing them, recognising their humanity,
valuing what we have.

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