

Dear all

Since starting to cycle round the parish a couple of weeks ago, I have discovered 2 things. Firstly, whatever compass point the wind is coming from, it is always blowing in my face. And secondly, at least 95% of the parish is furthest away... at least it seems like that! That is my perception.

Perception is a very strange thing. It is so convincing. We put so much stock in it, but it can be distorted or manipulated so easily. The examples I have given are pretty mild, and, apart from a mild frustration, have little real effect.

Sometimes, however, the effect can be very destructive indeed. We have perceptions of other people... what they believe... why they do what they do... Other words come rapidly to mind – stereotype... bias... Now it's beginning to sound more negative.

I wonder what perceptions we have. Perhaps it's about politicians and their motives; perhaps about the actions and activities of other people during lockdown. Yet 'perception' is related to 'perceptive' – to see clearly, to notice... The origin of the word is Latin – per (through, by means of) capere (to seize, to take). There is a real image of cutting through and grasping the point.

There is a passage in Isaiah, that relates to the awaited Messiah (Greek Christos, Christ) – *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear...* (Isaiah 11:1-3) Through the spirit (or should that be Spirit, with a capital 'S'?) he shall see through what is superficial, perhaps what has been created for him to see and hear, and perceive what is reality.

Later on, in Isaiah *Thus says the LORD, who makes a way in the sea, a path in the mighty waters, who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior; they lie down, they cannot rise, they are extinguished, quenched like a wick: Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...* (Isaiah 43:16-19).

I have heard this passage used very destructively by a church who wanted a radical new direction, and the leader effectively said to its congregation nothing you've done before is worth anything. That is not what Isaiah is getting at – after all, he has actually reminded them of former things, namely the escape from Egypt under Moses. Rather, I believe, he is encouraging the people not to get stuck in the past, to rest on their laurels as it were. Where is God going now? Where is He acting? Who is He with? Sometimes we think we need to pray that God will be with us in where we are going, whereas, in fact, we need to pray that we will be with God, wherever He has gone before... wherever He has made *a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...*

The Church of England is going through a very painful process at this present time – 2 in fact. One is learning how to respond to the report on the historical failures of safeguarding. The other is with regard to same-sex marriages, and other issues in sexuality. The church has gone through a very long and painful process of listening to both sides, reflecting on the theology, science, psychology etc., and has produced a long report that it is asking all church members to engage with and discuss over the next year. This may seem like rearranging the deckchairs while the COVID (or Brexit) ship is sinking, but it will have a profound effect on the future of the church. It may possibly result in a split in the Church of England – something the bishops are desperately trying to avoid – and it certainly will cause hurt and pain for a number of church

members, whatever the outcome. It does also have a safeguarding implication in who we treat our fellow believers.

The process is called Living in Love and Faith. The report can be bought as a book or downloaded. Introduction materials and links, including the download, can be found here <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/living-love-and-faith>

As a church, we are required to read it and discuss it at some time next year – certainly at PCC level. I would encourage you to investigate it thoroughly, perceptively and prayerfully. I would be very interested to hear any comments and responses in due course, as we decide how to engage with it as a church. And particularly to pray that all involved will not allow their perceptions to be clouded by what they think ‘the other side’ believes or does. How might God be making a way for our steps in this issue? What direction is He heading? Might we become left behind?

In an Advent reflection from the Arthur Rank Centre, Louise shared the following prayer, and exercise. You may find it a useful thing to do.

### **Prayer**

Loving God, we are tired and frustrated,

fed up and longing for rest.

Come alongside us in the darkness of long nights  
and the pain of separation from those we love.

Remind us of both your example and your power;

Remind us of both our example and our power.

Give us courage to speak out on behalf of those whose voices are quieter than ours,  
to live ‘kingdom’ lives now that speak of ‘not yet’.

In Jesus’ name, Amen.

### **Response**

It can be easy – and all too tempting – to just move from one season to the next without stopping to catch your breath. With Advent on the horizon, try to take some time this week to pause and take stock of the last few months. Go for a walk. Read a chapter of your favourite novel. Plant some tulip bulbs. Do a jigsaw. Buy (and eat!) a bar of your favourite chocolate or a bottle of your favourite wine (or whiskey, or gin, or tea. You get the idea!).

*If you have a little more time...*

...you may find it helpful to use this exercise to help you reflect on the church year that’s coming to an end:

*Looking back...*

- What one word best sums up your experience of living through this year?
- What was the best decision you made?
- What was the greatest lesson you learned?
- What was the most loving service you performed?
- What is your biggest piece of unfinished business?
- What else do you need to do or say to be complete with this year?

## Looking forward

- What is God calling you to do or be next?
- What would you most like to see change?
- What about your ministry are you committed to changing and improving? (We encourage individuals to interpret this term in whatever way is most appropriate to them; it's not just ordained people and 'leaders' who have ministries!)
- Where have you flourished this year? How will you continue to make that part of your life?
- What Bible passages have become important to this year? Could you learn them by heart?
- What one word sums up your ongoing approach to learning and growing as a result of this year?

Last Sunday, Chris chose Barber's 'Adagio for Strings' as the concluding voluntary for the service. A surprising choice for the feast of Christ the King. But Chris said he had played it as an elegy for 2020 (this coming Sunday marks the beginning of the new church year). Here is a recording by The Vienna Philharmonic is conducted by Gustavo Dudamel. (You can find Chris' version at the end of the latest service, on [\(1\) Facebook](#) – not sure if this link is working. If not, just go to our Facebook page, and look for the video).

[Vienna Philharmonic - Barber: Adagio for Strings, Op.11 \(Summer Night Concert 2019\) - YouTube](#)

In Amazon style – if you like that, you might like this...

'Sospiri' by Sir Edward Elgar, in a classic recording by that great Elgarian Sir John Barbirolli, with the New Philharmonia Orchestra.

[Sospiri, Op. 70 - YouTube](#)



Stay safe

Blessings and love

Mark