

What's emerging?



*Reflecting on the pandemic experience
with the Gospel of Mark
for a more compassionate,
just and sustainable future*

Rev. Christine Gilbert

INTRODUCTION

On the international and national stage, many are reflecting on the impact of COVID. How is this global crisis leaving us? What are we discovering about ourselves? What have been the highs and the lows so far?

These and other questions like them do not need to be ends in-and-of themselves. By our pondering and conversation, they have the capacity to give direction for the future. What are we noticing about this time *and what might it suggest going forward?*

Over the next five weeks, we will explore the griefs and gifts of the COVID experience. What are the losses we would do well to attend? What is budding that we would like to nurture into fulness?

Readings from the Gospel according to Mark will companion us in our reflection. Like the COVID crisis, the community for which the Gospel was written was going through a significant time of suffering and change. The tolerance of the Roman Empire had reached its end. Emperor Nero was using his military to stomp out opposition without mercy. Around the time Mark's Gospel was written, Jerusalem had been invaded, razed to the ground with fire and the temple was destroyed. Those who survived were displaced and eventually scattered across the countryside.

Thankfully, COVID has not been devastating on this scale for most Australians. But in the Gospel, we will hear many common threads as the word speaks out of and into a shared experience of fear, uncertainty and the chance for needed changes. Like them, we, too, will be invited to orient our emerging lives around the love of God revealed in Jesus.



We begin with Jesus' parable of the sower, Mark 4:2–9. Much is being revealed throughout the pandemic—daily and in a myriad of ways. We don't always hear nor are we always receptive. But the important things do stick and these weeks of reflection hope to illuminate them for us so we might tend them. With this as our aim, may the Spirit open the ear of our hearts during times of intentional reflection and contemplation as well as when we are in motion throughout the day, enabling us to hear the still speaking God.

WEEK 1: SCATTERED SEEDS

Reflection 1—Checking in with yourself

It's been said that the Chinese word for "crisis" is comprised of two characters, "danger" and "opportunity" or "change point." By standing back and reflecting on our experience of a crisis, it becomes more possible to see genuine opportunities. As tragic and life-altering as some crises may be, we do not need to be victimised by these events and circumstances. Instead, they can open us in new ways, help us discern or return to important priorities, and lead us through doors of growth and transformation.

The honourable Linda Burney MP recalls such a point in her life shortly after the unexpected death of her beloved husband Rick:



I remember, about a month after Rick died, I was standing at my kitchen sink washing up, and the kitchen window looked out to my lovely garden, and it struck me, you have a decision to make right now. You can either wallow in the depths of depression, which I had developed, feeling sorry for yourself

and angry with the world, and all those emotions that come with grief, or you can take this terrible experience and use it to grow. So that's what I did. It was a clear moment of decision and I grew into someone who was more compassionate, more empathetic. I became someone who truly understands how precious every minute is. (*The Australian Women's Weekly*)

Clear moments of decision, like the one experienced by Linda Burney, come upon us like a lightning bolt. We're doing dishes, walking the dog, staring out at the sea and suddenly truth flickers before us. They are a grace for which we gift thanks.

But we can make ourselves available and more aware of these revelations when they happen. We have a part to play including making space to listen, learning to hear with the ear of heart, and trusting deep down voices when they sound.

The COVID-19 pandemic is a worldwide crisis that is impacting us in many ways, ways it may take several more years to realise and unpack. For now, we are invited to check in with where we are. How are you in your soul at this moment? Where are you in the journey of change and grief? How would you describe your inner and outer reality in recent days? Does an image come to mind?

As you begin these weeks of reflection, take a few moments to jot down some words or sentences about where you are. Alternatively, you might sketch an image or write a poem. Check in with yourself using the space below or in your journal.

Reflection 2—Parable of the sower (Mark 4:1–9)

*Read slowly the parable of Jesus, pausing to take in the images.
Then explore further using the guide for Lectio Imago and Lectio Divina below.*



Listen! A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell on the path, and the birds came and ate it up.



Other seed fell on rocky ground, where it did not have much soil, and it sprang up quickly, since it had no depth of soil. And when the sun rose, it was scorched; and since it had no root, it withered away.



Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no grain.

Other seed fell into good soil and brought forth grain, growing up and increasing and yielding thirty and sixty and a hundredfold.



Lectio Imago

The practice of Lectio Imago is listening with the ear of the heart to an image. What might the Spirit be saying to us through the shapes, colours, mood and details before us? Look again at the images that accompany the parable. Which one best reflects where you are at this present time on the pandemic journey?

Sitting with this image:

- Cast your gaze across the photo. Get to know the image down to its details.
- Try turning the image around so you can look at it from different perspectives. What more is revealed?
- What words would you use to describe this image? (bright, sharp, hopeful)
- What, if anything, do these words have in common with your COVID experience?
- If you were to give this image a name, what would it be?
- Does this name illumine anything about your current state?

Lectio Divina

The practice of Lectio Divina is listening with the ear of the heart to the written word. What might the Spirit be saying to us through a single word or short phrase? Read again the parable, allowing a word or short phrase to stand out for you.

Hold this word/phrase prayerfully. You might repeat it like a mantra for a short time until it falls gently away as you continue in prayer.

When you are ready, have a conversation with the Spirit about the word/phrase. You can begin by saying, “How is this speaking into my life right now?” Leave plenty of space for listening rather than forcing something to arise. If nothing “happens,” that’s okay too.

When you sense the time has come to an end, give thanks.

Alternative Creative/Intuitive Option

Take your own photos to accompany the parable of the sower. As you look for fitting images, pay attention to what is revealed about the different types of responses in the parable. Where do you sense resonances with the pandemic journey in your experience?

Reflection 3—Attending to grief and gifts

Closed borders and restricted travel have been some of the obvious impacts of the global pandemic. Those with plans in 2020 watched as departure dates came and went, tickets and bookings were (hopefully) refunded or put on hold. When lockdowns happen, we are confined to certain activities and limited distances. Even as restrictions ease, international borders remain closed and travelling interstate is risky. This is just one example of how COVID brought disappointment, upset and grief to our lives.

At the same time, many people are getting to know their neighbourhoods, gardens and household members better. With life stripped back to the essentials, our loves and priorities may come into clear view. We are learning how to adapt and do things differently, some of which we will want to maintain. COVID has brought many gifts to us as well.

Use the space below to make a list of griefs and gifts that have been part of your pandemic experience. What losses came during this time? What graces?

Source of All:

*I place my life into the abyss of goodness,
your deep well of mysterious love.
I entrust myself to what will be.*

WEEK 2: DREAMS AND VISIONS

Reflection 1—Building back better

COVID restrictions over Easter weekend 2020 meant we were confined to a 5 km radius of our homes with household gatherings only. Sean and I woke early on Sunday and worshipped together before a lit candle sitting on the ledge of the window looking out on the street. We watched as the sun rose slowly over the houses in our neighbourhood.

After breakfast, we got stuck into the overgrown garden bed at the back of the house. Some plants were potted, others were cut back. Though far from expert, it was rewarding work. It felt good to have my hands in the soil, getting to know intimately what until then had been a mass of green spilling unto the lawn and concrete.



In the afternoon, I swept all around the house—slowly, prayerfully. The physical act, combined with the contemplative stance was exhilarating. My eyes and heart were wide open. I saw and was moved by families riding their bikes together, birds feeding and singing, people walking their dogs and an older couple lying on a rug on their front lawn.

A vision of Life came to me that day. I saw sustainability in our grounded-ness, beauty and connectedness in the simplicity close to home, and joy in being a part of creation. This vision informs many of my present decisions and gives direction for my future.

The pandemic is bringing dreams to many. Seeing what is possible during the pandemic, including the positive effects on the environment and rising of compassion within communities, some have called for intentional, lasting change. In the introduction to the Uniting Church in Australia's *#BuildBackBetter* document, President Dr Deidre Palmer observed:

One of the key learnings in this time of crisis is how deeply we are connected to one another, how deeply we depend on each other. What we have seen clearly is that we are only as strong and healthy as the most vulnerable members of our society. ...It has shown us that when we make sacrifices for the well-being of the whole society, everyone benefits.

Reflect back on your experience of 2020. What, if anything, were some highlights? (You might need to look beyond the surface.) When did you sense something new and good was on offer? How might these experiences give shape to your future personally and to the kind of community you wish to help create? Use the space below to write a few sentences of hope based on your experiences.

Alternative Creative/Intuitive Option

Watch the documentary *The Year the Earth Changed* narrated by David Attenborough. This documentary provides a glimpse into the significant environmental restoration that happened after less than 12 months of change in human activity.

Reflection 2—Redefining support systems (Mark 3:19b–21; 31–35)

Then Jesus went home; and the crowd came together again, so that they could not even eat. When his family heard it, they went out to restrain him, for people were saying, “He has gone out of his mind.”

...Jesus' mother and his brothers came; and standing outside, they sent to him and called to him.

A crowd was sitting around him; and they said to Jesus, “Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you.” And Jesus replied, “Who are my mother and my brothers?” And looking at those who sat around him, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother.”



The Gospel redefines the nature of household, the Greco-Roman foundation of society and economy. According to Jesus, paternal bloodline and inheritance are not the determining factors of one's identity. These physiological factors and customs alone do not guarantee compassionate, just or sustainable communities. Instead, those who do “the will of God” are enfolded into the

household of Christ and share a vision for the world where self-giving love, kindness, inclusion, equality, generosity and mercy rule.

Such an idyllic vision may seem “crazy,” then and now, since the alternative way of Jesus turns on its head much within our culture.

Imagine yourself in the place of Jesus' family in the reading above:

- What are your fears and hesitations as you consider a revised economy and worldview?
- How do you feel about Jesus' dismissal of long-time customs and traditions? Are some more precious to you than others?

Now imagine yourself as a member of the crowd gathered into Jesus' new household:

- What do you find drawing about the way of Jesus as you understand it?
- What difference does it make to hear Jesus call you his family?

Journal about, sketch or find some way of expressing what is arising in your reflection.

Reflection 3—Exploring and supporting

Bring to mind new (or renewed) habits, skills, activities and values you have taken on during the pandemic and list them below? For example, becoming a volunteer, learning or taking up again a craft or art form, befriending a neighbour, sharing food and resources with others, finding avenues for connection in lockdown.

How do you sense these activities are benefiting you and/or others? How are they adding to the compassion, justice, sustainability, love, kindness and goodness in our world? You might jot down your ideas next to the items on your list.

Finally, who or what is supporting you as you explore this new venture? Who has become part of your “household”? You might choose one person and write a note or prayer of thanksgiving.

WEEK 3: BRIDGING THE DISTANCE

Reflection 1—Alone together

Early on in the pandemic and now whenever an outbreak occurs, others are perceived as a potential danger to us by default. I remember getting caught up in the mad rush to buy food and supplies at the local IGA during SA's snap lockdown in November 2020. People who had become ordinary neighbours since the easing of restrictions in spring were once again a threat. Given the size of the shop, it was hard to maintain distance between us which added to the anxiety in the air as we re-learned COVID safe practices.



Time will tell what the lasting impact of physical distancing, mask wearing and hand sanitising will be. I am heartened by the urge to drift back together that seems to happen whenever the sense of danger disappears. We want to connect—at least to certain people. For COVID has also exposed the deep inequities and prejudices that exist, many of which can be attributed to what is called racialisation.

Recall your experiences of isolation, social restrictions, and distance from others during the pandemic. These may include being in lockdown, working from home, being separated from family and friends, awaiting the results of a COVID test, etc.

- What are these experiences like for you? Does an image come to mind?
- What is most difficult for you about these times?
- What, if anything, do these experiences reveal about what is important to you?

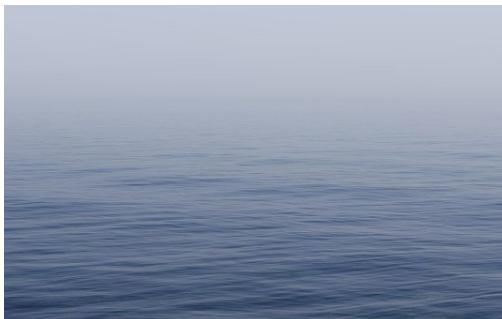
Now recall times of reunion, reconnection and increased freedom. These may include restrictions being lifted, returning to work, attending a gathering for the first time, getting an all-clear on your COVID test or making it through the isolation period.

- What are these experiences like for you? Does an image come to mind?
- What is most pleasing and joyful for you about these times?
- What, if anything, do these experiences reveal about what is important to you?

Journal, sketch or find another way to express what is rising for you in this reflection.

Reflection 2—Crossing over with faith (Mark 4:35–41)

Slowly read this story about Jesus crossing over the sea with his disciples. Pause and place yourself in the story as indicated. Without overthinking, respond to the questions. You might jot your responses in the space provided so you can return to them later.



On that day, when evening had come, Jesus said to the disciples, "Let us go across to the other side."

Imagine you are one of the disciples and Jesus instructs you to leave behind the familiar to go somewhere new and unknown. What do you say to Jesus?

Leaving the crowd behind, the disciples took Jesus with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped.

Imagine you are one of the disciples. What do you say to those in the boat with you?



Jesus was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?" He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, "Peace! Be still!" Then the wind ceased, and there was a dead calm.

Imagine you are one of the disciples. What are you thinking?

Jesus said to the disciples, "Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?" And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, "Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?"



Imagine you are one of the disciples. How might you answer the question, "Who then is this?"

In Mark's Gospel, Jesus and the disciples are continually on the move. They travel from one place to another, often crossing the sea in order to reach a new community. This is a highly symbolic act in the Gospel. Among other things, it represents an openness to new encounter. There is an element of risk and unknowing in this openness.

Look back at your various responses within the story. What, if anything, do they share in common with your COVID experience? Do you hear an invitation?

Alternative Creative/Intuitive Option

Find a way to cross over into unknown territory. Have a cuppa' with an acquaintance and get to know each other better. Read a book or watch a film from a perspective different than your own. Explore a park or trail that is new. Try doing something out of the ordinary—dancing to music in your lounge room, attending a craft class, becoming a volunteer.

Reflection 3—Connection, enrichment, transformation

The crisis of the pandemic and our search for necessary answers often releases our human tendency to blame. As the initial alarm begins to ease, airwaves fill with fault finding and finger pointing—who is responsible for what? And why are they not doing it better? faster? Amidst local arguments about quarantine, border closures, snap lockdowns and the vaccine rollout, a serious shadow has been cast across the world stage by questions about where, when and how COVID-19 entered the community?

Whatever our personal view, no one can deny that the strain on our society as the pandemic drones on is taking a toll on us all. It is tempting to avoid points of conflict with an appeal to “just get back to normal” or by burying differences under the social gatherings and events that are beginning to return. But this may be a missed opportunity. As Ambelin Kwaymullina observes in her poetic reflection *Living on Stolen Land*:

The places
where different worlds meet
can be places of connection
enrichment and transformation

We are called to continue crossing over for the sake of increasing harmony, understanding and a new future for us all.



Quiet your mind before this painting by Clarissa Beckett and imagine you are the figure in the orange boat.

As you leave behind home shores, you pass by another boat. You glance over and see the faces of those with whom there has been misunderstanding, fear or estrangement in these months.

Notice the sublime surrounding. What would it take for your inner reality to reflect something of this? How does the quote above shed light on your relationships?

WEEK 5: HOSPITALITY, ENCOUNTER AND CARE

Reflection 1—Opening the borders of our heart

I remember the disheartening feeling that came over me when states began closing their borders to South Australia during our snap lockdown in November 2020. Though it may have been understandable and even though I was not planning to travel interstate, I argued internally with the decision. After all, I didn't have COVID nor did anyone I know. I felt rejected and "unclean."

The close-open-close-open response to state borders is symbolic of how precarious hospitality can be at times. Hospitality always involves a certain amount of risk. Even when we welcome friends into our home, we cannot be absolutely certain that everything will go as planned. Food burns, drinks spill, awkward moments occur, offenses happen. Hospitality also has the capacity to expand our hearts, which may be its biggest risk!



One of the great blessings to come into my life during the pandemic has been my involvement with the Emergency Relief Services at St. Andrew's. Amidst the ever-changing border situation, my life is enriched by the hospitality we have been able to offer from the start of the pandemic until today. Every time we open the doors, opportunities for encounter are availed and we are changed.

The origin of the word "hospitality" implies something more fulsome than receiving friends and family into our homes or the more contemporary understanding of the food and beverage industry. Early on, hospitality was seen as "the virtue of a great soul that cares for the whole universe through the ties of humanity." In other words, the welcome offered is ontological, charitable and deeply transformative.

In her book *The Monastery of the Heart: An Invitation to a Meaningful Life*, Sr Joan Chittister writes poetically and poignantly about what we might learn from fifteen centuries of monastic life. In a chapter on hospitality, she writes:

It is possible, of course,
to make community
out of “our kind of people,”
out of people who look like us
and have the same backgrounds we do.

But that is not
the kind of community
a Monastery of the Heart
sets out to be.
And with good cause.
When Benedict of Nursia began
his new way of living
in wild, licentious, sixth-century Rome,
he turned that world upside down...

He opened the doors
of the monastery
to anyone who came,
at any time,
to anyone who knocked,
no matter who they were
or where they had been in life
along the way...

Benedict’s community met everyone,
whoever they were,
with friendship and trust and honour.

The pilgrim,
the poor,
and the stranger
all became new royalty
at the monastery door...

“Great care and concern
are to be shown,”
The Rule goes on,
“in receiving poor people
and pilgrims because in them
Jesus is received.”

The point is clear:
The guest is much more
than simply another social contact.
Guests, the unknown and wandering other,
are the final
and authentic addition
to any Benedictine community.

Without the guest
we make the community life
all about us alone.
Families that concentrate
only on themselves
do not build up
the entire human family...

Without guests, life here
is just one more instance
of securing ourselves in the midst of
our people, our kind, our type.

But the guest refuses to allow us
to become snug and secure
in our little monastic cells.

The guest intrudes on our schedules
and makes demands on our energy
and prises open our closed minds
and stretches our hearts
to the breaking point...

Guests bring us God
in the guise of the immediate
and the urgent,
the uncomfortable
and the unknown.

Guests bring the world in,
place it at our feet,
and dare us to be
who and what we say we are.

They are a blatant sign
for all to see
that any group that calls itself
a Monastery of the Heart—
but exists
only for itself and its own kind—
is really not a real community
at all.

A Monastery of the Heart,
is a community with stretchable,
permeable,
illimitable boundaries
made up of anyone who happens
to come into it
at any time,
and always saying,
“We are here for you.”

What, if anything, in Chittister's excerpt resonates with your pandemic experience?

What ideas or lines in Chittister's excerpt did you find challenging or difficult?

Do you sense an invitation to love more fully and wholeheartedly in what she is saying? If so, what might this mean for you practically?

Journal, sketch or find a way to express what is rising for you in this reflection?

Alternative Creative/Intuitive Option

Write a prayer for your home or make a plaque, even if just on paper, for the front entrance. Given what has been revealed during the pandemic, what does an open heart and door that risks hospitality look like? What phrase or words express this for you?

Reflection 2—Relinquishing and making space (Mark 6:7–13)

Jesus called the twelve and began to send them out two by two, and gave them authority over the unclean spirits. He ordered them to take nothing for their journey except a staff; no bread, no bag, no money in their belts; but to wear sandals and not to put on two tunics.

He said to them, “Wherever you enter a house, stay there until you leave the place. If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them.” So they went out and proclaimed that all should repent. They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them.

Travelling light and receiving the hospitality of others brings many gifts as those who have gone wilderness camping, walked a pilgrimage trail or made retreat can testify. We learn that we can do with less than we think. We discover generosity in a world from which we are often insulated. We sense an interconnectedness that always exists but of which we are not always aware.



When the news displays images of people hoarding toilet paper, pasta and rice, in quiet, humble places another reality always exists. Many of us witness and are ourselves participants in a great outpouring of kindness and sharing. Wherever there is openness and welcome, goodness and love are able to flourish, as the Gospel suggests.

Make a list of the things you have done without during the pandemic? Include items that you miss as well as things you are happily learning to do without. What do you notice as you reflect on this list now? What might this suggest for your future?

Reflection 3—Our emerging life

As life looks to take on new shape after the pandemic, many are choosing to invest their time, energy and resources in new ways. In the Gospel, Jesus encouraged the apostles to stay with and give themselves to environments that were hospitable and life-giving. When we sense receptivity and the possibility for growth and love, this is often an indicator that we are walking in tune with Spirit.

Recall what life was like for you before the 2020 pandemic. Who made up your primary relational network? With whom did you interact on a regular basis? What was your weekly schedule like? In what activities did you participate? Jot down what comes to mind below.

When you gaze at your pre-pandemic life:

- What, if any, are the points of regret and grief for you?
- How have relationships and activities changed even if they remain in your life?

Eternal and Everlasting:

*I give thanks for all that has been—
the people, the experiences, the events of my past.*

*Today, I acknowledge the changes
that have come because of the pandemic.*

*I see and allow myself to feel the loss
that is part of this unsettling time.*

Comfort me and help me move forward with you in trust.

Cont.

Consider the shape of life as we begin to emerge from the crisis. Who is part of your primary circle of relationships? How do you find you are spending your time during the week? As you anticipate the future, what light and wisdom is shed on your journey by the wise voices and compelling images below? What do they encourage in you?



“Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world’s greatest need.”

—Frederick Buechner

“Before I can tell my life what I want to do with it, I must listen to my life telling me who I am.”

—Parker Palmer



“For me, becoming isn’t about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn’t end.”

—Michelle Obama

“You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognise the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope.”

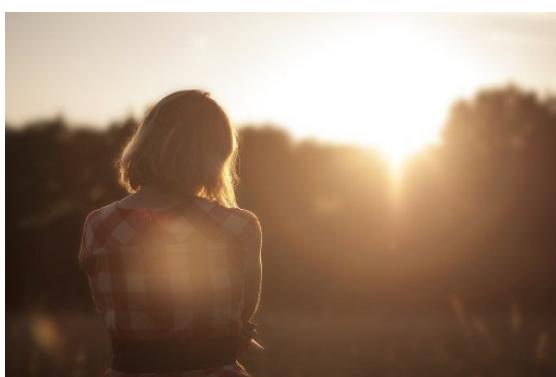
—Thomas Merton



WEEK 5: REST AND SOLITUDE AS REVOLUTIONARY ACTS

Reflection 1—The shy grace that comes in solitude

Lockdown forces us into solitude. It is like a mandatory retreat, if there is such a thing. Each of us experience solitude in our own way. We welcome moments of quiet and rest. We appreciate the luxury of having nothing to do. We are able to take on home projects such as cleaning closets and drawers, renovating an area of the house and, of course, tending the garden. We read books, watch movies, play games and do puzzles. We pray, journal and gaze at sunrises, budding flowers and birds.



We also encounter hard stuff. This is not unusual in solitude. Without the ordinary activities and relationships to shore up our identities, we are confronted with the question: Who am I, really? When we are not distracted from the pain that is part of life, we are invited to explore it deeply and compassionately.

It occurs to me, most of us are short on experience and guidance when it comes to being in solitude. Because it includes challenge and even pain, I hear people too often conclude, “Oh, that’s not me,” when it comes to silence and alone time. But there’s a reason all faith traditions include seasons of intentional fasting, withdrawal and silence. Without what the Christian tradition calls a work/prayer balance, the love we wish to bear has a way of becoming warped and egoistic.

Recall your times in lockdown:

- What gifts have come to you during days or weeks of solitude?
- What difficulties do you experience with the alone time and silence?
- What might it mean for you to explore gently and compassionately the pain in order to receive grace from God? (If you struggle with this, as most of us do, a spiritual companion may bring assistance.)

Journal, sketch or find some way to express what is rising for you in this reflection.

Reflection 2—The necessity of deserted places (Mark 6:30–32)

The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught. He said to them, “Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while.”

For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat. And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

Lockdowns remain in the tool chest of our state governments as a way to manage COVID outbreaks. Though they may be “short, sharp and shiny,” they can have big impact. For those in Melbourne in particular, the trauma and practical challenges of being locked-in and masked-up is very real for many. It may seem strange, then, to conclude our five weeks of reflection where we began—contemplating the gifts of solitude. We may feel reticent to pause if we don’t have to, especially with so much life to catch up on.

In a culture that values productivity and gages whether a person is of “good value” based on the practical contribution they make to community, we might ask: What good is rest? What does going to a deserted place do for us and the world?

In an article for *Dumbo Feather*, Parker Palmer speaks about what he gains from his yearly wilderness excursion into the Boundary Waters Park in Minnesota. Below is a relevant excerpt:

My knowledge of the divided life comes from personal experience: I yearn to be whole, but dividedness often seems the easier choice. A “still, small voice” speaks the truth about me, my work or the world. I hear it and yet act as if I did not. I withhold a personal gift that might serve a good end or commit myself to a project that I do not really believe in. I keep silent on an issue I should address or actively break faith with one of my own convictions. I deny inner darkness, giving it more power over me, or I project it onto other people, creating “enemies” where none exist.

I pay a steep price when I live a divided life—feeling fraudulent, anxious about being found out, and depressed by the fact that I am denying my own selfhood. The people around me pay a price as well, for now they walk on ground made unstable by my dividedness. How can I affirm another’s identity when I deny my own? How can I trust another’s integrity when I defy my own? A fault line runs down the middle of my life, and whenever it cracks open—divorcing my words and actions from the truth I hold within—things around me get shaky and start to fall apart.

But up north, in the wilderness, I sense the wholeness hidden “in all things.” It is in the taste of wild berries, the scent of sunbaked pine, the sight of the Northern Lights, the sound of water lapping the shore, signs of a bedrock integrity that is eternal and beyond all doubt. And when I return to a human world that is transient and riddled with disbelief, I have new eyes for the wholeness hidden in me and my kind and a new heart for loving even our imperfections.

Parker Palmer is a productive, generative person. Among other things, he has written several books and founded the Center for Courage & Renewal which hosts workshops, conferences and Circles of Trust retreats that are held in English speaking countries around the world. Palmer’s productivity arises from and is sustained by the practices of his Quaker faith, most of which are based in silent contemplation. He is an example of someone who strives to live the rhythm and balance of action and reflection or work and prayer.



As we enter a new phase in the pandemic journey, activity is slowly returning. Programs, meetings, social events, working with colleagues create a busyness that may be welcome but which can easily consume us. Where solitude was once a given, now we must choose it and make it happen in an intentional way in order to nurture a prayer/work balance.

What activities have returned to your life since the beginning of the pandemic? How do you experience them differently now?

What would it mean for you to spend time regularly by yourself in a deserted place? What does this look like for you?

How would you say you are doing with your work/prayer or action/reflection balance? Is there an invitation at this time?

Alternative Creative/Intuitive Option

Create a reflective space in your home or garden. Place furniture and items that encourage rest and contemplation. Keep this area just for this purpose as much as possible so you can enter with intention and be renewed.

Reflection 3—Imagining a new future

In an article for the *Financial Times*, Indian author Arundhati Roy wrote:

Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next.

We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, and data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world.

Time in the desert enables us to see what's emerging in us and around us. We can get a clearer sense of that alternative world embodied so beautifully for us by people like Jesus. In the silence and stillness, we connect with what vocational solitude Maggie Ross calls "Love indwelling," and, as she wisely says, "We go to the heart of pain to find new life and share it with the world."

What, if anything, do Roy's words above inspire in you?

When in these months have you gone to the heart of pain with Love indwelling and found something new? How would you like to share this with the world?



Painting by Hans Heysen



Painting by Albert Namatjira

What insights have you gleaned during these weeks of reflecting on your pandemic experience?

Are there any practical changes you feel drawn to make?

IN CONCLUSION

As with any expedition in life, the spiritual journey is not meant to be made alone. We are all in need of spiritual mothers and fathers, elders who can companion us well. The best guides do not offer advice or answers. In fact, I say we run far from anyone who suggests there are once-and-for-all answers! Rather, the best companions ask good questions and point out signposts and landmarks that arise from our own lived experience and wisdom.

The pandemic has undone much. Our once-trusted certainties and structures have been rocked if not fallen apart completely. Spiritual companions can be helpful as we navigate the new world that is emerging.

I am always available for companioning, or Spiritual Direction as it is traditionally called. In Spiritual Direction, we meet together once-a-month or so to talk about life, looking for the sacred woven through all things. We listen out for invitations to love. Spiritual Direction is also a place to explore practices that can sustain your desire for a world of justice, compassion and sustainability. It is a time and place to discern decisions big and small. Ultimately, it is about attending to your soul, whatever that means for you.

If you would like information about other Spiritual Direction, these sites may be helpful:

Australian Network for Spiritual Direction (ansd.org.au)

Living Well Centre (livingwellcentre.org.au)

Ignatian Heart Spirituality (ignatianheartspirituality.com)

For scripture-based reflections that accompany each week and other resources:

The Quiet Centre (thequietcentre.com)

I welcome informal conversation about your pandemic experience in general and what these weeks of reflection have revealed.

*May peace be with you,
Christine*

If you valued this resource and would like to make a gift in support of the ministry of St. Andrew's Uniting Church we welcome your offering:

BSB: 105 015
Account #: 089117940