

BBC RADIO 4 SUNDAY WORSHIP 28th JUNE 2020

RE-IMAGINING THE FUTURE

Opening announcement:

BBC Radio 4. It's time now for Sunday Worship, led today from Scotland by John Bell and colleagues from the Iona Community.

SONG

THIS IS THE DAY

*WILD GOOSE COLLECTIVE, from the CD 'THIS IS GOD'S WORLD',
published autumn 2020, available from ionabooks.com and wildgoose.scot
Words & Music: John L. Bell
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John

Good morning wherever you are
from wherever we are.

I'm John Bell and I'm speaking to you from my home in Glasgow.
My colleagues whom you'll hear shortly are elsewhere.
Jo lives in a village in Renfrewshire,
Alison in a small town in Cumbria,
and during the service we will be hearing music from Shetland,
the Western Isles and the Borders.

This morning our worship will focus on the past we are leaving,
the present we experience
and the future to which God calls us.

What should we leave behind?
What do we experience now,
and what might the future be like to which we are called?

That's what we will be exploring together
but for the moment, we return to hear the song
This is the Day sung by the Wild Goose Collective

Music continues

Jo

In our morning prayer, when I say, 'Come, Lord Jesus.'
we can all, if we wish, respond '**Come, Lord Jesus.**'

To where I am or where we are -
whether still in bed, or having breakfast,
whether sitting or driving or enjoying being outside,
Come, Lord Jesus.
Come, Lord Jesus.

To how I am or how we are -
whether glad of this new day

or fearing it,
whether with a song in our heart
or sadness in our soul,
whether full of faith, doubt or apathy,
come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

To calm us down
or move us on,
to help us open a door
or close one,
to share hope, light or truth
as much as we need it,
come, Lord Jesus.

Come, Lord Jesus.

O brother Jesus,
you loved befriending people,
meeting them as and how they were.
You enjoyed mixed company
and unrestricted conversation.
In this time which we share,
befriend us that we might delight
in the pleasure of your company.

Amen.

John

One of the great insights of the Bible is that God doesn't always do the expected thing through the expected people.

The Hebrew scriptures indicate that the movers and shakers in Israel's history were not primarily the kings and their courtiers, the academics and the law-makers, but the prophets.

And the prophets had three great callings
The first was to convince people that the past was not without its faults
for which they shared responsibility.
The second was to provide a measure of consolation.
The third was to offer glimpses of a better world to which
they could aspire.

We find all these in the prophecies of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

MUSIC

THE DAY DAWN

*ALY BAIN AND THE SCOTTISH ENSEMBLE from FOLLOW THE MOONSTONE,
track 8, WHIRLIE RECORDS, CD 4*

John

Isaiah begins with a critique of what has gone wrong
and speaks on behalf of God in uncompromising terms,
firstly about a lapse in faith.

Alison My people have no discernment (1:3)
I loathe your new moons and festivals;
they are a burden to me. (1:14-15)
I can tolerate them no longer.
When you hold out your hands in prayer,
I shall turn away my eyes.

John Later God comments on the mistreatment of the vulnerable in words which seem very contemporary given the recent demonstrations against racial inequality.

Alison Woe betide those who enact unjust laws
and draft oppressive edicts,
depriving the poor of justice,
robbing the weakest people of their right,
plundering the widow, ruining the orphan. (10:1-2)

John Jeremiah represents God identifying the negative effect which callous human conduct has on the creation.

Alison Your wrongdoing has upset nature's order
and your sins have kept away her bounty. (Jer 5:25)

John Having heard these words, you might want to switch off and be rid of this pessimism, except that it's not pessimism - it's reality. In both ancient and modern times, the growth, the betterment of a society depends on the ability of people to learn from their past mistakes. If we learn from the past, we can move to a different future. If we deny the past, fail to critique it, we repeat our mistakes.

I don't know about you, but I am aware that in the past three months there are some things of which I was either ignorant or had avoided thinking about. These have been put in glorious profile. They are structural deficiencies of which we cannot be proud.

We did not acknowledge until recently the debt we owe to undervalued and underpaid care workers, many from outside the UK, who late in the day have been feted as heroes.

We were not aware until very recently that if you were from a black, Asian or minority ethnic culture, you were far more likely to die from the Corona virus than if you were white.

We did not recognise until recently that what should be 'normal' for the air we breathe, the health of our rivers, the wellbeing of animal, bird and plant life had been so compromised by our bondage to practices that pollute.

We did not realise that the world has become so interconnected that the poorest nations in which Covid 19 did not originate, would suffer most from its ravages because money and medicine and purchasing power are dominated by the wealthiest nations.

Maybe we suspected some of these things but didn't put all the pieces together. But given the information that has flowed in recent months, we can hardly feign complete ignorance.

What do we do with these realities, which we cannot deny? Just avoid talking about them because they make us feel uncomfortable? Or look for someone to blame? Or do we say that because some of these things are political, Christians should leave them alone – as if God loved the church but not the world?

We cannot move forward unless we acknowledge the mistakes – real or unintentional - of the past... and are prepared to do that which some politicians in every nation seem keen to avoid: to admit that we have got it wrong and be big enough, or become small enough, to say that we are sorry.

HYMN

DEAR LORD AND FATHER OF MANKIND (Tune: Repton)
*CHOIR OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE from the CD: BEST LOVED HYMNS –
CHOIR OF KING'S COLLEGE, DIRECTED BY STEPHEN CLEOBURY,
EMI RECORDS, 2001*

THE PRESENT

John

The second job of the prophets was to offer some comfort.

It's bad enough having to cope with a disaster and own up to ways in which we might have contributed to things going wrong, or admit to exempting ourselves from what could have made things better.

But as well as being penitent, we need some assurance that things can be different, that God has not turned away, that there is comfort and hope in the midst of bewilderment and regret.

And Isaiah, who has spoken censure in God's name, also in the same name offers words of consolation.

MUSIC

HERR ROLOFF'S FAREWELL
*ALY BAIN AND THE SCOTTISH ENSEMBLE from FOLLOW THE MOONSTONE,
track 16, WHIRLIE RECORDS, CD 4*

Jo

This is the word of the Lord,
the word of your Creator:
Have no fear for I have redeemed you
I call you by name, you are mine. (43:1)

pause

When you pass through water I shall be with you.
have no fear, for I am with you;
when you pass through rivers
they will not overwhelm you. (43:2)

pause

Stop dwelling on past events
brooding over days gone by.
I am about to do a new thing

Even through the wilderness I will make a way,
and paths in the barren desert (43:18-19)

John

These are words of solidarity from a God who feels for our brokenness.

I think there is a tendency in us all to hope that God in some startling way will come alongside us. And I do not doubt that people have such personal moments of grace. But I also believe that we should not disregard the other, more ordinary and immediate ways in which we are strengthened. And I use that word 'strengthened' because that at its root is what 'comfort' means.

I have become more acutely aware than ever of the sheer delight of human company, of having not snatched conversation or tweets, but long talks with people over the phone or in the open air. It is not that I've been feeling sad or lonely. It has just been an enrichment to converse, discuss, share stories, explore what we have been experiencing. At least once a week I have a long phone call from a friend from my student days who lives in California. We have not been in such regular contact for 40 years. We're making up for lost time. This is a gift of God.

Recently a neighbour left a huge piece of carrot cake at my door. I hardly knew his name, never mind his baking abilities. Neighbours are gifts of God, that's why we are told to love them. They are good for us.

But I have also found an unbelievable delight in looking after my small front garden. It was covered with red stone chips for 50 years. When the lockdown started I had just dug over the ground. Garden centres were closed, so in a daft moment I put ordinary potatoes in the ground to see what would happen. At the moment they are in flower – beautiful small pink flowers with yellow centres. One of my neighbours thought I was growing cannabis. She never knew that potatoes flowered, and she had never expected to see them in a front garden. Every day peas which I planted seem to grow exponentially. So I keep winding twine between sticks to help them have something to cling on. The other day I realised I was taking care of them as if they were fledglings. There is something wonderful about engaging with the natural life forces which are there all the time. This too is a gift from God. It strengthens us.

But more than that, I find it ultimately comforting to realise that Jesus, in entering human history, engages in total solidarity with us. He does not keep himself apart from those who fear or hurt or cause hurt, but engages with them. Nor does he exempt himself from the possibility of persecution or pain. Sometimes he has to flee for his own safety and sometimes he breaks down in solidarity with those who mourn. One of the things I discern in him is that true comfort does not come from an instant answer, but from knowing that whatever we feel has been expressed, heard and valued.

And being a Jew, Jesus would find comfort for himself in that great repertoire of the poetry of experience called the Psalms. For in the psalms we are given a vocabulary for pain which is every bit as important as a vocabulary for praise. These poems let us know that someone has been in the painful or confused place where we now are; and they affirm that God who listens is never neutral.

Psalm 42 is one of the most beautiful poems. It begins with the expression of a sense of abandonment, and because that has been expressed to God it moves to the possibility of hope and change.

As a deer longs for running streams,
so I long for you, my God.
I thirst for God, the living God.
when shall I come into your presence.

Tears are my food day and night
while all day long people ask me,
'Where is your God?'

We're going to listen to these words sung in a language which only a minority in Great Britain speak – Gaelic. But music has the ability to offer meaning beyond words, even words like

As a deer longs for running streams,
so I long for you, my God.

MUSIC

PSALM 42

MASSED GAELIC CHOIRS, from the CD LASAIR DHÈ – FLAME OF GOD: CLIAR AND GUESTS, track 4, MACMEANMNA SKYECD19, www.gaelicmusic.com

REFLECTION - REIMAGINING THE FUTURE

John

The prophets had a THIRD role. It was not fortune-telling, but it was about the future. From an appreciation of the wrongs of the society they lived in, they re-imagined the future as God would want it. And they did this not with stories, but with graphic images of a better world, a transformed society.

And Isaiah does this so well.

MUSIC

SALME

ALY BAIN AND THE SCOTTISH ENSEMBLE from FOLLOW THE MOONSTONE, track 4, WHIRLIE RECORDS, CD 4

Alison

On that day the deaf will hear when a book is read
and the eyes of the blind will see out of impenetrable darkness.
The humbled will once again rejoice
and the poor will praise the Holy One.
The ruthless will be no more,
the arrogant will cease to exist. (29:18-19)

John

A transformed community, and also a transformed world.

Alison

The wilderness will become like garden land
and garden land will be as common as scrub.
Justice will make its home in the wilderness
and righteousness dwell in the grasslands. (32:15-16)

John

And then comes a line of great promise:

Alison

See I am creating a new heaven and a new earth!
The past will be no more remembered. (65:17)

John

And if we looked in any of the other great prophets -
Jeremiah, Micah, Hosea - we would find other images, other
glimpses of a future to which we should aspire.

And when Jesus comes, it is no longer aspiration. The longed-for
future becomes a reality when he delivers his first sermon in his
home synagogue:

Jo

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me;
he has sent me to announce good news to the poor,
to proclaim release for prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind;
to let the broken victims go free,
to proclaim the day of the Lord's favour. (Lk 4:18-19)

John

The phrases Jesus uses
good news to the poor
release for prisoners
sight for the blind
the liberation of the broken
....do two things immediately.

They challenge the notion that God is only interested in me and my soul.
These words spoken by Jesus declare God's interest not just in our
personal faith but in the well-being of society.

And secondly they do not just appeal or refer to religious people. The love of God is not restricted to the precincts of churches or synagogues, mosques or temples. These words, these images, resonate in the minds of all people who long for a different day.

These sentiments are at the root of the song we call the Magnificat, the song of Mary who realised that, through her, God intended to turn the world upside down.

Sometimes when I look at the pictures we have of Mary, the last thing they suggest is that she is a revolutionary, prophetic figure. She deserves a more energetic profile - which she gets in this version of the Magnificat written by an American composer to a very well-known Irish tune.

SONG

THE CANTICLE OF THE TURNING

WILD GOOSE COLLECTIVE, FROM THE CD 'THIS IS GOD'S WORLD', published autumn 2020, available from ionabooks.com and wildgoose.scot

Words Paraphrase of Luke Ch. 1, Rory Cooney

Melody 'Star of the County Down' Irish traditional, adapt. & arr. Rory Cooney copyright © 1990 GIA Publications, Inc.

John

We are told – though I am not sure that we have fully taken it in – that there is no immediate recovery from the pandemic. The virus will be around for a while, as will the consequences of economic meltdown. If we are going to recover, are we aiming to go back to the old 'normal' whose defects we were thinking about earlier?

Because if we are not, we need to envisage a world which is in some ways radically different. We will have to use that faculty which was in the prophets and glorious in Jesus, namely our imagination, not to escape from reality, but to re-shape reality.

So I want to ponder some alternatives in the light of what God has revealed in scripture and particularly in Jesus.

If we believe, as Jesus said,

'you shall know the truth and the truth will set you free'

....do we want children in the future to be as ignorant of the past as many or most of us adults have been? I mean, I had to wait until I was fifty to discover that Scotland had owned a third of the slave plantations in Jamaica, and that the Victorian opulence of Glasgow and other British cities was the result of the trans-Atlantic transport of enslaved Africans, tacitly condoned by Christian churches.

Do we have to wait for statues to be toppled before we own our past?

If we believe that Jesus declared there is

good news for the poor,

and if we know that poverty has grown in our nation, and that people living in poor neighbourhoods are far more likely to die from Covid 19 than the wealthy, are we prepared to identify the root causes, and to treat those who are economically disadvantaged with dignity in the future? Or do we have to pray for another sporting personality or stage celebrity to name an injustice before it is rectified?

If we believe that

God loves the world,

and we know that in the world God loves everything from the Australian coral reef to the Amazon rain forest to the Arctic Pole and even the humble bumble bee are all threatened by human failure to respect the integrity of creation, are we going to continue living so irresponsibly that the children of tomorrow will have to go to museums to see what we regard as commonplace today?

If we believe that Jesus has mandated his disciples to

heal the sick,

are we going to live in the expectation that huge pharmaceutical companies and better medical technology will come up with the solutions? Or should we at least consider personal responsibility and preventative rather than responsive medicine?

If we believe that Jesus cares that

prisoners be released,

and we know that the causes of crime are very often rooted in childhood trauma or deprivation, are we just going to build more prisons, or look at what can be done to prevent vulnerable people becoming potential offenders?

And if we believe from the evidence of the gospels, that Jesus spent a hundred times more of his life on issues of healing, teaching, reconciliation, evangelism, engaging face to face with people, than he ever did on bricks and mortar, are we going to going to shape the future of the church according to his priorities or remain obsessed by the upkeep of buildings and structures some of which have long been obsolete?

MUSIC

ATHCHUINGE

MASSED GAELIC CHOIRS, from the CD LASAIR DHÈ – FLAME OF GOD: CLIAR AND GUESTS, track 1, MACMEANMNA SKYECD19, www.gaelicmusic.com

John

People of faith should be keen to re-imagine the future. That is what Jesus did in most parables. He turns the prevailing common-sense on its head by surreal stories about people who work an hour being as valued as those who work a day, a reprobate who has squandered half the family fortune returning home to the warmest of embraces people who live hand to

mouth being the principal guests at the most splendid of feasts.

We can but imagine... that one day sculptors will erect statues not of white male military generals but of black women who lovingly change the diapers of the diseased one day television companies will stop producing reality shows which delight in dysfunction, and instead celebrate what the potentials of marginalised people can do one day ballet companies will put away the time-honoured props for Swan Lake and appear dressed for a performance of a new heaven and a new earth.

One day the natural world will cease to be the victim of neglect and become the beneficiary of human kindness

One day the Christian Church will supplement its creeds from distant days past with commitments to en flesh God's dreams for tomorrow.

One day someone will write a song which begins not

 'And **did** these feet in **ancient times...**'
but "“And **will** these feet in **future years** ”

SONG

WE WILL MEET

MHAIRI LAWSON / ANNA GLOVER Recorded for programme

Words: Original Norwegian text and English translation by Hans-Olav Moerk, translation adapted by John L. Bell

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Music: John L. Bell

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Alison

Let us Pray.

Help us gracious God.

Pandemic is not a word which fits easily into prayers
we are used to less menacing terms.

As a nation we are not usually so uncertain of the future.

So help us not to fear it,

but to identify every sign of hope

and encourage every angel of mercy who appears in human form.

God, in your kindness,

hear our prayer.

If we feel savaged by the untimely death of those we love
or face the possibility of redundancy and restricted income,
save us from despair and the desire for revenge.

Reveal to us our better selves, our resourcefulness and
doors we have yet to open.

God, in your kindness,

hear our prayer.

Prevent our leaders from the presumption of high office,
liberate them to listen to the dreamers more than the schemers,
the dispossessed more than the over possessive
so that decisions are shot through with integrity
and seasoned with wisdom as well as knowledge
God, in your kindness,
hear our prayer.

And open the eyes of all of us
to the goodness and giftedness in our neighbours
which we may never have seen.

We pray in the name of Jesus
who has seen the goodness and giftedness in us.

Amen.

John

One of the great prophets of the twentieth century who, in himself,
embodied the ability to be critical of the past, represent the present, and
envisage a very different future, was the Salvadorian martyr Archbishop
Oscar Romero.

And it was precisely because he was prophetic that he was killed. Had he
kept within the safe parameters of religious language and the things of the
church, he would have had a long life. But he believed that God loved the
world and all its people and was unwilling to compromise in his passion
for faith and justice.

In a moment our service will close with a song based on the main themes
of his life. But for now, as we take our farewell,

May God bless you, wherever you are,
and God bless those you love, wherever they are.

And may God give you today good hope, and good light and good love.

SONG

THE LORD OF THE EARTH

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