

NEWCASTLE READER

ISSUE 17



Khatyn Memorial, Belarus

In this issue...

**KHATYN, THE
VILLAGE IN BELARUS
THAT DOESN'T EXIST.**

ALSO

JUST A SEC, READING THE GOSPEL, IN LOCKDOWN, A
NEWLY-LICENSED READER WRITES, A LIGHT TO MY PATH
and LAST WRITES



The Right Reverend Stephen Platten, Warden of Readers, with Reverend Doctor David Bryan, Principal of Lindisfarne College, and the newly-licensed Readers on 19th December 2020 at the Church of St Nicholas South Gosforth. They are from left to right: Elizabeth [Libby] Cripps (Upper Coquetdale), Diane Armstrong (Longhorsley St Helen) and Gwyn Mackenzie (Riding Mill St James).

Newcastle Reader: a magazine produced by Readers in the Diocese of Newcastle, with the valued support of others, in a spirit of being generous, open and engaged.

DESIGN: Jon Kirkwood

CONTENTS

4 EDITORIAL

5
JUST A SEC Jan Porter reflects on life and offers a message of hope and a prayer.

6
READING THE GOSPEL Bishop Stephen Platten reminds us of the power of narrative and of the inspiration afforded Readers in this diocese by our rich Northumbrian Christian heritage.

8
IN LOCKDOWN Three Newcastle Readers offer a reflection on the impact of the pandemic on their ministry over the last year.

10
A NEWLY-LICENSED READER WRITES Gwyn Mackenzie describes her preparation for Reader Ministry and records how her focus now that she is licensed will be on social action.

12
A LIGHT TO MY PATH Derek Burton, a Reader Emeritus, tells of his life, discipleship and Reader Ministry, the inspiration for his recently-published book.

14
KHATYN Anne Horne gives an account of her visit to Khatyn in Belarus and tells the moving story of the village.

18
LAST WRITES The editor reflects on pandemics past and present and ponders what they teach us.

EDITORIAL



GLORIA BRYANT

As I write this, the view from our study window is of our garden covered by a thick layer of snow. It is very cold and there is a sense of stillness and freshness about the world from where I am sitting.

However, we are once again in lockdown and in much the same situation we were in when the previous edition of the magazine went to the printer last spring. During the first few weeks of the new year, it might have been all too easy to become depressed: short days, winter weather, cut off from face-to-face contact with family and friends and an ever-rising death toll from Covid-19, not to mention the fall-out from Donald Trump and Brexit. However, the days are lengthening and spring cannot be too far away. Moreover, a successful national vaccination programme seems to be offering us hope of a return to some kind of normality before the end of 2021. So, I do hope this edition finds you all in good spirits and good health.

It has been a challenge to source articles for this edition, so I am very grateful to everyone who has willingly provided me with material, only some of which has to do with our current situation. In this edition we hear from Bishop Stephen Platten who was interim Warden of Readers at the time his article was written. Recently, Bishop Stephen has been invited by Bishop Christine to become our new Warden of Readers. In December 2020, Bishop Stephen licensed our new Readers. Though most of us were unable to attend the licensing, we do have a photograph of the occasion in this edition, but we look forward to a time when we can all come together again and welcome Bishop Stephen and our new Readers face-to-face. In addition, we have an article by Anne Horne about Khatyn in Belarus, a country much in the news recently. Khatyn is a reminder of the 'evil that men do' and the cost of war. Thank you also to Gwyn

Mackenzie, one of the newly-licensed Readers, for offering insights into how she hopes to exercise her ministry as a Reader, and to Derek Burton, a Reader Emeritus, for sharing the story of his book. Derek has also recently written follow-up book: 'New Creation'.

I am aware that by the time you receive this edition the snow may be a distant memory and, in all probability, Easter may have come and gone. As editor, I am only one stage in the production of the magazine. We are dependent on the availability of both our designer, Jon Kirkwood, and our printer, Shiremoor Press, to take the magazine on to completion. May I take this opportunity to thank both Jon and the staff of Shiremoor Press for all they have done over many years to make possible the magazine in its present form.

Finally, there would be no magazine without articles and so, as always, may I encourage you to open the computer and write something, or if you are a photographer or artist please send me some images that you would be happy to have printed – I always leave it to the contributor to decide what to send. If you would like to try out your ideas on me, then please get in touch. In the last edition I noted the email address to which articles should be sent. No sooner had the magazine been posted to you all than my email account was hacked and I was advised to change my email address. So please note the new email address to which all contributions can be sent:

gcadman054@gmail.com

JUST A SEC

SPRING 2021

**JAN PORTER IS A READER AT
MONKSEATON ST PETER AND
SECRETARY OF THE READERS'
EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE.**



I do not suppose that the belated request you received in the autumn for your Annual return was greeted with overwhelming enthusiasm.

Covid 19 notwithstanding, Central Readers Council are still expecting Annual figures and a report to the Diocese is also due. When I sent the request, I appreciated that these are testing times for everyone. I am grateful to you, your Incumbents and Area Deans for responding quickly to complete and send the forms. I have found them inspiring and moving to read and I am also personally grateful for the kind messages and prayers that came with them.

Newcastle Readers have found many ways to exercise their ministry within the constraints of lockdown rules. Some of you have found creative means to share the Good News whilst caring for your family members who are ill. Others have achieved marvellous things whilst being in pain or suffering from poor health themselves. On permitted exercise walks Readers have found ways to care for God's Good Creation by litter picking and tidying. At the same time, they have evangelised by explaining 'when asked why they are undertaking the tasks. Many have set out to improve their skills with technologies: Bible studies and prayer meetings have Zoomed around their parishes, nation, and the wider world. Films have been made and music recorded. The ministry teams you belong to have ensured worship and fellowship might continue even if church buildings have had to close. Telephone conferences and parish hubs have kept community members in touch with each other. Readers who were able to do so have volunteered to transport people to hospitals and clinics, helped at food banks and delivered Christmas dinners to their communities. Churches and neighbourhoods have been served in both prayerful and practical ways. For all of this we give grateful thanks to God.

In spite of all the above there are days when things may seem very dark and sad. There are days when events that are happening in the world

are very frightening and distressing. It isn't only the virus that threatens us but disasters around the world both natural and human made. We may feel overwhelmed. A classmate I had at primary school was one day so overcome by life, (I think he couldn't understand the lesson), that he ran out of the classroom and away from school. I can still see him running up the curving drive towards the flats where he lived. His mum brought him back very shortly afterwards and our teacher did not treat him harshly. She asked us all to help him feel better. She then gave him a part in the Christmas play. He was a villager who came to the stable to see the baby and he was to sing "Jesus, good above all other." He didn't want to at first, but our teacher gently persuaded him. At the performance he did sing, rather breathily, but clearly, "Give us grace to persevere." I can hear him now and often remember him when I feel discouraged and that things are all too much.

The grace God sends us to feed our hearts and souls is something that prompted Thom M. Shuman to compile the book "Grace will lead us home." It is published by Wild Goose publications from the Iona community. Before producing it, Shuman read the Bible from beginning to end and when he found a word, phrase or verse which spoke to him he wrote a short prayer. He placed the verse or verses in the book with his prayerful responses - one for each day of the year, including one for leap years. As with most resources the Iona Community prints, reproduction is permitted for non-commercial use. As I write Day 21 has gone by for 2021 but the prayer is relevant to any day. It is a response to Matthew 14.31: "Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, 'You of little faith, why did you doubt?'"

When we wonder

If the new captain even
Knows the bow
From the stern;
When we worry
That justice
Will be jettisoned
Over the side;
When we fear
That the vulnerable
will be left behind,
may the winds of faith
continue to refresh us,
so we may journey
with you until we reach
the shores of compassion,
inclusion, peace and hope.

READING THE GOSPEL...

+ **STEPHEN PLATTEN**

Bishop Stephen is the former Bishop of Wakefield and Associate Bishop and Warden of Readers in the Diocese of Newcastle.




In January 1969, I was licensed as a Reader (actually in those far off days we were called Lay Readers) by one Robert Stopford, then Bishop of London – the licensing was in the Lord Mayor of London’s Church of St Lawrence Jewry, just outside the mediaeval Guildhall at the heart of the City of London.

Only a year or two later, I was told that, when licensed, I was the youngest Reader in the Church of England. Neither then, nor since, did I check to see whether this was true- suffice to say I was below the age of majority (21) as it then was, and doubtless ‘pretty wet behind the ears’! I well remember taking the examination in solitary splendour in the sacristy of St Margaret’s Church, Lothbury, right next to the Bank of England, and under the eagle eye of the Revd A J Drewett, the Rector of the said church. My memories of my tutor are equally vivid. Sitting in the Vicar’s study of St Mary’s Hornsey, the door would frequently burst open followed by the immediate entry of a huge Alsation dog at whom Philip Brassell, the Vicar (and my tutor), would bark sternly in German ‘Raus!’ – that is in English: ‘Out!’.

It was Philip’s initial encouragement that set me on the road toward a lifelong enthusiasm for theological study. Almost concurrently, began my association with the Friary at Alnmouth and the Society of St Francis. My desire to meet with a school friend, who was then at the University of Newcastle led to him to suggest the Friary as the venue. Thereafter, I stayed for a week annually, for some six or seven years. During one of these stays, I drove Brother Harold to Shepherds Law, where the two of us sized up the site with a surveyor’s tape measure. It was this experience too that introduced me to the remarkable history of the Church in Northumbria, the most significant early ‘cradle of Christianity and Christian culture in northern Europe. Harold was soaked in the tradition of Saints Aidan and Cuthbert, and Alnmouth Friary itself felt firmly part of that tradition. Annually, there would be the Northern Pilgrimage, following a route via the four border

abbeys of Jedburgh, Dryburgh, Melrose and Kelso, and finishing at Holy Island, with a great celebration on the penultimate evening with the tents pitched alongside Budle Bay. Then, in 1968, the year of a Lambeth Conference, I tagged on to the friars following Hugh Ashdown, then Bishop of Newcastle, and also Bishop Trevor Huddleston, our preacher and, of course, a fearless fighter against Apartheid in South Africa. We sang Focolare songs and, finally, the ‘Hymn of the Northern Saints’ - to Arthur Sullivan’s rousing tune to ‘Onward Christian Soldiers’!

All this immersed me in the riches of Northumbrian Christianity, which stands at the very heart of our own inheritance in this Diocese of Newcastle, and which offers so much for all called to Reader ministry here. Where to begin? Well, it was at the Battle of Heavenfield, just north of Hexham, that King Oswald defeated Cadwallon to reunite Deira and Bernicia into the single kingdom of Northumbria; during the eight years of his reign, Oswald was the most powerful king in all England. At Heavenfield, he erected a cross before the battle and prayed with all his troops. Although Edwin, his predecessor, had been converted to Christianity, it was Oswald who most firmly established its missionary impulse by asking the Irish monks at Iona to send an ‘apostle’ to Northumbria. First, Cormac, a most austere bishop came unsuccessfully to spread the gospel. Soon after, Aidan, who had a far gentler approach was sent in Cormac’s place. During Aidan’s time, Oswald, his patron, was killed in battle against the Mercians - indeed the Midland town of Oswestry still bears his name. His body was first interred at Bardney Abbey in modern day Lincolnshire, but



was later moved to Gloucester before finding its final resting place in Durham, alongside the incorrupt body of Aidan's successor at Lindisfarne, Cuthbert. Aidan became Bishop of Lindisfarne in the year 635, and remained bishop there until his death in 651. He is said to have died in the church at Bamburgh, where the forked timber on the tower ceiling is believed by folklore to be the post against which Aidan was leaning when he died; the modern shrine (and not tomb as some modern descriptions would have it) is thought to be in the vicinity of the actual place of his death in the former wooden church. Aidan was a most subtle apostle to the Northumbrians. In contrast to his severe and unsuccessful predecessor, according to Bede's history, Aidan was a true apostle never being too severe on his hearers. Instead, Aidan taught:

“You should follow the practice of the Apostles, and begin by giving them the milk of simpler teaching, and gradually nourish them with the word of God until they are capable of greater perfection and able to follow the loftier precepts of Christ.”

The foundations of the Christian kingdom were established by Aidan; Cuthbert would further deepen the roots of faith. Cuthbert had been born in Dunbar and brought up in Lauderdale (until the Battle of Carham in 1018, all this was still well within the Kingdom of Northumbria), north of the abbey at Old Melrose, on the banks of the Tweed. He is said to have had his calling on the very night in 651, when Aidan died. Cuthbert's prior was St Boisil (the same as in modern day St Boswells), and it was at Melrose that he received his monastic training. Cuthbert would succeed Boisil as prior and then later, in 665, become prior of Lindisfarne. Throughout his life, Cuthbert, despite being called to be Bishop of Hexham and later Lindisfarne, had a vocation to the eremitic life, that is to be a hermit; amongst other places, he built a hermitage on Inner Farne, off the coast of modern day Seahouses. His piety and devotion became legendary. Bede writes:

“Above all else, he was afire with heavenly love, unassumingly patient, devoted to unceasing prayer, and kindly to all who came to him for comfort.”

Cuthbert died in the year 687, on Inner Farne, in the hermitage he had built for himself.

But what might all this say to us, living the best part of one and a half millennia on? Perhaps primary are the twin strengths of prayer and scholarship. Both Aidan and Cuthbert were clear that their lives had to be exemplary for others – in prayer and in their knowledge of the gospel. But then, Bede's remarkable work, which made these narratives

available to us through his first ever history of the English people, indicates further the essential importance of study and scholarship. The twin monastery of Monkwearmouth-Jarrow where Bede lived, worked and died, was also the birthplace of the Codex Amiatinus, the earliest one volume Latin Bible to survive even into our era. Indeed, two years ago, it made its first journey back to England (to the British Library), some thirteen hundred years after it had been taken as a gift to Pope Gregory II in the year 716. Lindisfarne itself is, of course, the place from whence the remarkable illuminated gospels were produced – they are effectively the earliest surviving publication in these islands.

Aidan, Cuthbert, Bede - all knew the power of narrative, both from Holy Scripture itself, but also in the manner in which they would convey the message of the Christian gospel. This says so much to all of us who are called to various ministries in the contemporary Church. For Readers, especially called to a ministry of preaching and teaching, the power of narrative remains essential – why else did Jesus speak in parables, why else does Bede communicate through stories in his great history? All this requires us to keep our minds alert and fresh. One of the few depressing experiences, when I was serving as a diocesan bishop, was to enter the study of a Reader or indeed a priest and know immediately of the years that person had trained; nothing much, if anything had been added to their shelves since!

This indicates, then, not only the importance of continuing to study theology and extend one's mind. It also means deepening our hinterland, by reading novels, poetry, biographies, non-fiction, current affairs – all that builds up a rich tapestry of experience and a well-stocked mind. This, set firmly in the context of daily prayer and the sacraments, allows each of us to draw upon the deepest wells of our faith so that we may feed all who stumble upon us on their way. The descriptions that Bede gives of Aidan and Cuthbert are still the essence and foundation of all we are called to give and be. Perhaps one of the most encouraging responses to our teaching and preaching is to hear someone say:

“Ah, I'd never seen it in quite that way before – That offers a new slant, a new insight, yet one more pathway in our relationship with the God of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Remembering your particular ministry, one might almost call it, as in the title of this brief reflection – Reading the gospel.....

IN LOCKDOWN

'STRANGERS ON THE SHORE'

CAROLE FIELD IS A READER IN THE PARISH OF BEADNELL ST EBBA



The passage below was written for my last Reader return, almost on impulse as I looked back on my active ministry during the period under review and compared it rather sadly with the previous year (due to my husband's health issues we were having to isolate from March onwards which naturally restricted my ability to mix indoors with others although participating in outdoor worship was a joy!)

Now submitting this for others to share, I relive those summer months and am full of wonder at the way in which God takes a hand in our human lives, turning the everyday events into special memories.

Living on the very edge of the beach on Beadnell Bay in North Northumberland has long been a source of inspiration for me in regard to my faith and worship, so during the substantial rise in visitor numbers this summer (between June and September 2020) the opportunity arose out of a somewhat bizarre circumstance, for me to speak informally about my faith as I met, talked with, and listened to a diversity of 'strangers on the shore' as it were!

Collecting litter each day along the mile or so of sandy beach and armed with my mask, gloves and a 'pick up stick' and often our two border collies as well, I found a more natural way of speaking of my faith and hope to those who stopped to ask "why do you do this?" or frequently "should you have to do this?"

Perhaps already you can see where these opening remarks would lead my answers. As I moved along the rows of wind-breaks, sandcastles and beach activity around me, I often reflected on the ease of these conversations which here

along the shore and without the formal setting in which our faith message is more usually shared, real exchange of thought was free to take place uninhibited and free to go in any direction.

Now incredibly a year has passed since we first 'locked down' and lived our daily lives mainly within our beloved home or just outside on the bay. The privilege of being so close to the natural wonder of God's creation is not something which we have ever taken for granted and the winter months found us learning new ways in which we could continue to be part of our local communities, chiefly when we came to consider how we could possibly offer our community annual Christmas Day Lunch in 2020 given the restrictions pertaining due to the virus.

I prayed that, somehow, we would find a means to make it happen as usual since it would surely be more than ever needed at a time when families would be unable to travel. Once again God's hand was held out when I approached a local business against a background of changing circumstances for us all, through which the generosity of many allowed this event to happen. I would like to close with this prayer.

Lord of all creation, as we consider the way forward in our Diocese and introduce new ways to become Church to more people but in the light of necessary reductions in clergy, will you encourage us to draw on the extraordinary experiences of this past year, thereby allowing a time of quiet individual reflection to inform our future direction and giving your voice a chance to speak to us before we fill the space too quickly with a prescribed plan in which you cannot be heard through our well intentioned but potentially mistaken need to be too active too soon.

Help us to give ourselves and others time to heal and recover from the effects of this cruel virus and to be guided at a gentle pace through the days ahead, strengthened always by your love and trusting that in this way we will be enabled to increase your Kingdom here on earth.'

Amen.

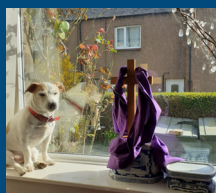
EXPERIENCING ONLINE WORSHIP – AND LEADING IT.

SARAH MITCHELL IS A READER IN THE PARISH OF AMBLE ST CUTHBERT.



Very soon after the beginning of the pandemic lockdown in March John, our vicar suggested that we should “record” our services and intercessions and sermons on my android phone and use Dropbox His worried in “put” them on the website for publication on line. I was lost round about “record”. Whilst not being completely lack in IT understanding it was not a tool that I had felt necessary to develop much beyond basic skills once I retired from work full time.

I now found that I had to get my IT skills into 21st century – fast - or not take part alongside the rest of the worship team. My equipment was the first concern. I hadn't even upgraded to Windows 10!! I had an android phone. I wasn't sure where the



Sarah's Lent window with Barney the dog

video and voice recorder was on that either. And what was Dropbox??! My husband will confirm that I literally cried tears of self-pity and fury in the first few weeks leading up to Easter 2020 as I tried so hard to film quiry at the beginning of each week was: “What are you doing on Sunday this week?” He knew that it would influence the level of my anxiety for the week to come!! To begin with I was not sure about these

online services. How could they possibly replace our loving and much-loved church services? The most vital element was the work carried out by our churches webmistress Meg Dixon who carefully spliced our services each week and uploaded them onto the church's website and Facebook. Every church should have a Meg. I was astonished by how we appeared to be building an online congregation and by the numbers of views. Some weeks achieving in the thousands!!

I have bitten the bullet and now have an updated IT system complete with Webcam and feel much more confident about online work. We have extended our presence by offering a daily prayer together with a short commentary. We access music for our services on line, much missed by so many. We involve the greater congregation by asking them to record readings and prayers. We have Café Church through Zoom each month. I am not sure where we go in the future. However, I do expect to continue to have a presence on line for that foreseeable future – and probably beyond.

If you are struggling with online services please get in touch with us. You will find us at our website <https://www.stcuthbertsonline.com/>

‘GATHERING FROM MANY PLACES YET ONE IN FAITH AND HOPE’



KATHERINE GOVIER IS A READER AT THE CATHEDRAL CHURCH OF ST NICHOLAS, NEWCASTLE.

At the Cathedral, we've always been conscious of being a scattered community that has to work to maintain links with one another.

It's not just the ministry team of clergy and Readers that acts as the 'glue', of course, and, as lockdown threatened, our pastoral care team was already redoubling its efforts to keep in touch with people. Home communions and visits in person had to stop but telephone calls didn't, to reassure the anxious, calm down the angry or just have that chat that makes people feel loved and part of that community. As the building closed, worship moved to YouTube, with short reflections on weekdays and longer services on Sunday, with our individually recorded sections being painstakingly assembled. Recording videos on a phone balanced on a pile of books was a challenge to be met.

On weekday mornings, Morning Prayer went live on Facebook from clergy houses, gathering a community of prayer not just from the north east but from much further afield. Zoom came into play for Sunday 'coffee' after the service, giving us an opportunity to share news, moans or what had cheered us during that week. In the summer, the Dean led a discussion group on 'difficult questions' as we sought to begin making sense of what was happening and what the future might hold.

Had the kingdom already come in the selflessness of those maintaining essential services and in the increased spirit of neighbourliness we saw, in the early days of lockdown at least? In many senses, ministry was what it had always been: keeping the lines of communication open so that the Spirit can flow. Living the lives that others live and enabling reflection on our experiences, meaningful prayer and action for the Kingdom.

A NEWLY-LICENSED

GWYN MACKENZIE FROM RIDING MILL ST JAMES WAS LICENSED AS A READER IN DECEMBER 2020.



So, I'm one of the 'Class of 2020' from Lindisfarne College of Theology who were licensed in December.

We were originally scheduled to be licensed in October but this was 2020 and not a normal year so the Covid-19 effect meant an October date turned into a November one and then into a December one. Finally, the three of us came together with our six, masked, family and friends on the 19th December at St Nicholas's Church in Gosforth and we were licensed by Bishop Stephen Platten. It was lovely, quite emotional and most certainly memorable for so many reasons. The photos show we observed appropriate social distancing, we all wore face coverings, there was no celebration lunch or even coffee afterwardsnot allowed! It was shared across the country on Zoom (sadly without sound) so those who would have travelled to be with us could join in, no-one could present us with our scarves or our bibles but we did affirm our belief in the faith revealed in the Holy Scriptures, declare we would only use forms of service authorised by Canon, we made our declarations to the Bishop and now we can wear the blue scarf!

Training takes a long time and it's a special thing to share this very special occasion with people you first met on your selection day and then journeyed alongside over three years. I'll always be grateful for their friendship particularly over the bumpy bits of the journey and look forward to sharing ministry with them as we move forward.

My first piece of work as a licensed Reader? – Communion by Extension on Christmas morning!no pressure then! The Parish is in vacancy so the Area Dean dropped this on me a couple of weeks beforehand when we knew I would be licensed by then. First time I'd preached on Christmas Day too but the congregation were tolerant and all went well. I was touched to see some of our Methodist friends there and even the odd Roman Catholic. This is one of the side effects of Covid, it has brought us together as Christians,

crossing denomination boundaries as well as distance. This can only be a good thing and something we mustn't lose as we go forward.

Soon after Christmas we were back in lockdown and, though churches were allowed to remain open, our PCC decided it was safer to close our doors again so now we're back on Zoom. As I write I'm leading Morning Prayer once a week and a Service of the Word every three weeks or so as part of the rota of retired clergy. I'm also going into church once a week. I think it's important the building is prayed in so I say Evening Prayer. That's not to say I don't think prayer outside of church is valuable, of course I do but the church has been prayed in for over 170 years. The prayers of our predecessors are in the very fabric of the place, it's alive and I feel a responsibility to keep that heart beating.

The Parish, though, is not all of my ministry. As I alluded to earlier, the training journey was a bit bumpy in places. For me this came when I realised that Parish ministry was not what I was being called to. This came about following a placement on the Theological Reflection module. I asked to experience a church-based project working in the community and was placed with Walking With in North Tyneside. Walking With has been supporting Asylum Seekers and Refugees for 20 years based in Wallsend running a small foodbank, a clothes bank, English lessons and doing anything they could to help the people that crossed the door, with their new life in the UK. I got involved in whatever needed doing – and still do. After three and a half years I'm still there – longest placement ever! I've learned a huge amount about the resilience of the people we call Asylum Seekers, about the generosity of a community and not a particularly affluent one at that, and the spirit of volunteering.

Volunteering was something I knew a bit about anyway. I've been involved in Scouting as a Leader since I was 18 and have been fortunate in that my Scouting has taken me, not just all over the UK but all over the world. I've worked with people from as far afield as Chile and Japan.

READER WRITES...



There's something special about people coming together with a common purpose. You find it in Scouting and I found it in Walking With. I also found it in Lindisfarne College of Theology – again a group of volunteers, albeit having been through a selection process but as Readers in particular we're all still volunteers, with a common purpose – to serve God.

Round about the same time I started my training I also became a Trustee of Together Newcastle, a charity which is a Joint Venture between the Diocese of Newcastle and The Church Urban Fund. It's part of the Together Network, a national network of faith-based charities dedicated to working locally with churches, individuals and organisations and, in this area, we support churches to create faith-based social action in some of the most challenging communities between 'Tyne and Tweed'. Have a look at our website to see more about what we do (www.together-newcastle.org) As part of my role as a Trustee I became the manager of the Financial Inclusion Project which was (and still is) working in the Ashington area. I'm currently managing all the projects we have running whilst seeking funding to enable us to help more people do more in their neighbourhood – temporarily while we seek the funding to have someone else do that.

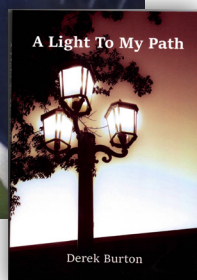
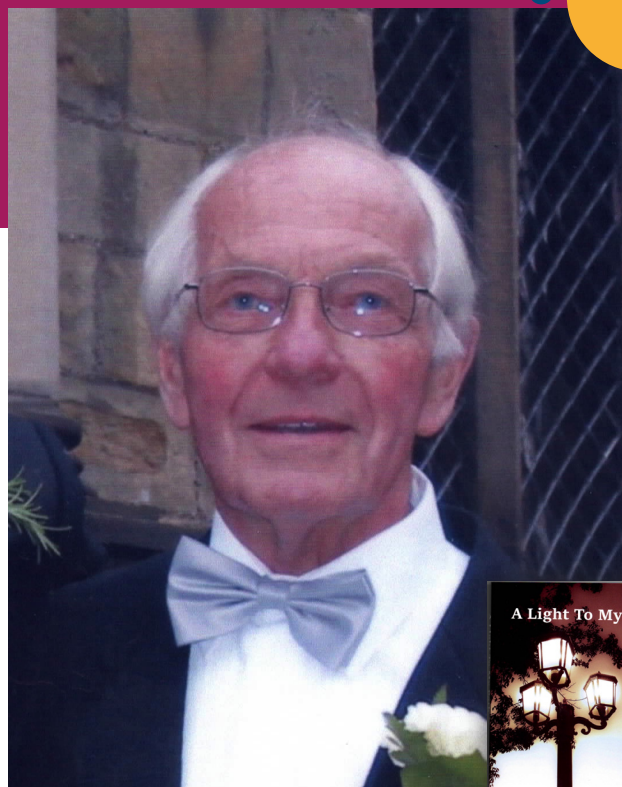
The Theological Reflection helped me work out that this was what I am meant to be doing. A retreat, again as part of the training, confirmed this. I remember particularly from that event something of a Kairos moment. We were studying

1 Samuel 17 – the story of David and Goliath. I was struck by the fact that David was given the King's armour to go and face Goliath but it didn't fit so he went with just his sling shot and staff. Why am I bothering with all this training, I thought, I can do my Walking With and Together work and my Scouting without being a Reader. But when you read on, David eventually gets his own armour and goes on to fight in that – achieving much. What's important is having the 'right armour' and that's what being a Reader does – that's what the training would give me. The good folk at Lindisfarne worked out a programme that would help me towards a ministry focussed on social action. This was recognised by the then Warden of Readers and that's what I'm doing.

We all exercise our ministry in different ways and I think this is an exciting time to be a Reader in Newcastle Diocese. Bishop Christine often quotes Isaiah 43:19 as being relevant to this time in the Diocese and now Covid-19 has forced us to think differently too - we mustn't stop that. We are about to do a new thing, we will 'make ways in the wilderness and rivers in the desert'. The wonderful Cynthia Wood is a member of our congregation – she wrote in this magazine not so long ago about being one of the first women to be licensed as a Reader just over 50 years ago – and I feel privileged to have her support. When she was licensed, she says there were people in the congregation who used to shut their eyes or look away when she got up to preach. Thankfully, things have changed since then. She told me at Christmas, and again just recently, that she had always wanted to see the empowering of the laity but that she never thought she'd see it in her life time. Seeing me doing the things I've been able to do since I was licensed, she says has made her so happy she can 'go to her grave dancing' (but not quite yet please, Cynthia!). But she's right – that's what we are 'empowered'. As Readers we have a huge role to play in building God's Kingdom here in this place. He has given us the gifts we need and empowers us to make a difference. We have the 'right armour' and I can't wait to get going who's with me?

A LIGHT TO MY PATH

DEREK BURTON IS A READER EMERITUS AND WORSHIPS AT THE CHURCH OF MONKSEATON ST MARY



I am very pleased to have been invited by Gloria Bryant to write an article in this issue of Newcastle Reader. Gloria suggested that I should set out my reasons for writing 'A Light to My Path', give some indication of the subjects I have touched upon in my sermon compilation, and what I hope a new generation of Readers, and readers in general, might gain from reading it.

But first, something about myself. I came to faith in Jesus Christ when, in my late twenties, as a student of architecture, I went on a hitch-hiking tour of Scandinavia with some fellow students, and ended up with no money, and washing dishes in a hotel in Stockholm. One day, alone in southern Sweden, I experienced a deep depression, a sense of utter desolation, almost suicidal in intensity. I recovered

sufficiently to return to London where my office was close to the church of All Souls, Langham Place, next to Broadcasting House. One day, a lunch hour service was advertised, so I went in. Nothing in the service meant anything to me, but on my way out I picked up some Christian leaflets from the lobby table. It was in reading these on a train one day, that the person of Jesus Christ suddenly became vividly real to me. I didn't see anyone, or hear a voice, just a total conviction that Jesus was real and alive. I went to see the curate at All Souls about this, and he helped me to make a commitment to what I had experienced; faith in Jesus Christ for forgiveness of sins, and assurance of eternal life.

I met my wife Marian, at a Bible study group in the house of a mutual friend. I opened the door to her, helped her with washing up, and invited her to a concert. In a short time, we were engaged, and in 1969 were married at the Church of St. James and St. Basil in Newcastle, which was Marian's home town. We settled in Reigate in Surrey, where in 1970 our son Paul was born, followed in 1971 by David. I qualified as Architect RIBA in 1973 with a Congregational Church as my design subject. In 1978 we moved from Reigate to Whitley Bay, when I joined Faulkner Browns Architects in Killingworth. In 1981 I was licensed Reader by the Bishop in Newcastle Cathedral. After thirteen years with Faulkner Browns, I finished my career as Surveyor in the Newcastle Diocese, and retired in 1996. Both of our sons are married and we have five grandchildren, the eldest aged 17 and the youngest aged 4. After retirement, I continued in practice as private architect with several local projects, including the conversion of a church into offices for a charity working with homeless young people. My client at that time was none other than Tony Garland who was leader of a charity called Churches Acting Together. It is now run by the DePaul Trust.

And now, some background information about the book. The original title is 'Scripture Messages', forty copies of which were issued free to family, friends, and church members. Hence the reviews, which have been carried over to the back cover of 'A Light to My Path' which has identical contents. It was thought by my reviewers that a new title could have wider appeal than a more obviously 'religious' book. 'A Light to My Path' includes a Foreword by Tony Garland, Lay Canon of the Cathedral, and a dedication to my wife, Marian, "with thanks for her patience, support and advice over many years in the preparation of the messages contained within it." My book is being published by Amazon UK Bookstore, and according to New Generation



Publishing, is being listed in numerous outlets, including Waterstones, and throughout the UK, EU, North America and Australia.

So, what are my reasons for writing 'A Light to My Path'? Readers in the Anglican Communion have the authority of a bishop to preach and teach. I see preaching as an enormous privilege and an awesome responsibility. According to the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans chapter 10, "faith comes by hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." But he makes the point, "how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?" In the Bible we have the written word, a permanent record of the spoken word which, unless it makes an immediate impact, can be ignored or soon forgotten. My book is a written record of my spoken word, and can be read and studied at leisure by anyone at any time. All the messages are on two facing pages which makes for easy daily reading. These are my reasons for writing 'A Light to My Path'. The reviews give some indication of the value some readers have placed on it.

What have I touched upon in my sermon compilation? As a committed believer in the authority of the Bible as the Word of God, I have tried to preach according to my understanding of the Scriptures, and on the readings from the Anglican Lectionary. My belief is based on personal experience since my conversion, and on the Word itself as expressed by the Apostle Paul in his second letter to Timothy chapter 3 verse 16 – "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God". The Church understands this to mean the whole of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation. The liturgy of the Anglican Communion affirms the authority of Scripture in its readings, in the Nicene Creed, and the Eucharist. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus said to the two disciples: "This is what I told you while I was still with you. Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms." Then He opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures.

What do I hope a new generation of Readers, and readers in general, might gain from reading my book? My hope and prayer are that they might gain a greater understanding of the Scriptures and their authority, as an encouragement to pray and study the Bible to bring them to more maturity in Jesus Christ. My advice to a new generation of Readers is that proper and adequate preparation, daily prayer and study of the Scriptures, is necessary to fulfil their duties to preach and teach. I do not profess to be a prophet, but there is such a thing as the

gift of prophecy. In chapter 14 and verse 1 of his letter to the church at Corinth, the Apostle Paul says: "Follow the way of love and eagerly desire spiritual gifts, especially the gift of prophecy."

REVIEWS

My opinion is that A LIGHT TO MY PATH is excellent! It's easy to read, and I know it will be a great blessing to many people. I would recommend it to others and would hand it on to someone else. I would buy it in a bookshop.

Douglas Tate - Co. Durham

I greatly value your book of messages, quite inspiring, and hardly a day goes by before it comes off the book-shelf.

Revd. Edward Burfitt - Newcastle upon Tyne

I would recommend this book, especially to more mature, thoughtful Christians. It has thoughtful, engaging, interesting insights, with new perspectives on familiar passages. Insightful, practical, well written, broad overview.

Peter Howitt - Surrey

I recommend this book for many reasons. It is a well-organized collection of talks or messages on extracts based on the Bible. Informed and illustrated with stories and examples, as well as references to other parts of the Bible. This book wants to make you read more of the chapter from which the texts are taken. Above all it is a candid testimony to the power and grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to change and enrich lives. It has integrity. A good book, I think, to use for a Bible study, as it aims to point to a personal relationship with Christ. More than ever, it is relevant today in our beautiful but disturbed and chaotic modern world.

Rosemay Dunlop -Tyne & Wear

The messages are based on the authority and truth from the Scriptures. The topics are almost all introduced with a meaningful illustration from everyday life or from history that brings added insight into the particular subject. Anyone who speaks in Christian meetings would find the succinct thoughts valuable. I would recommend it for personal devotional use as daily reading and a useful tool as a resource for potential speakers.

Margaret Tyler - West Sussex

KHATYN, THE VILLAGE IN BELARUS THAT DOESN'T EXIST.

ANNE HORNE IS A READER IN THE
PARISH OF HOLY TRINITY AND ST
MARY, BERWICK.



“ So, what happened at Khatyn? On 22 March 1943, partisans cut a communication wire. A convoy of police attached to the SS was sent out to investigate. ”

Belarus is not your normal tourist destination. Two factors made up my mind to travel there. I read somewhere that very few British people go, and visa restrictions had been lifted.

A country with 11,000 lakes should have given me a clue as to the weather, even in July: pouring rain. Everything not covered by lake is covered by birch forest or marshes. Over the centuries, Belarus has been part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Poland, the Holy Russian Empire and finally the Soviet Union, with a period under very brutal Nazi occupation during the Great Patriotic War - 1941 to 1944. It became an independent country in 1991, but is still very much a one-party communist state. The one place that I read about and knew that I wanted to visit was Khatyn (pronounced locally Hateen), a village deep in the birch forest that ceased to exist on 22nd March 1943. In its place stands the National Memorial. In the forest, the land is poor - the translation from my Belarusian guide book reads: 'the land is stingy'. People eked out a living trading timber, hunting, gathering wild honey and tapping birch trees. They still do it today - cut into the bark, tie a jam jar to the tree and let the sap flow into the jam jar. It is bottled and sold in shops across Belarus.



The story of Khatyn's downfall began at the 1936 Olympics. Hans-Otto Woellke, a German shot putter, won a gold medal. He also happened to be a close friend of Adolf Hitler. During World War II, he was a captain in an elite Security Police attached to the SS. All of this passed Khatyn by, as did the outbreak of war. No one bothered the quiet little backwater in the forest. There was nothing to worry about. The Soviet Union and Nazi Germany had signed the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in August 23, 1939. This was a Treaty of Non-aggression, a neutrality pact between Germany and the USSR. A written guarantee of peace. The Pact came to an abrupt end



on 22 June 1941, when Nazi Germany launched Operation Barbarossa and invaded the Soviet Union. Minsk was captured on 28 June 1941 and all of the present-day Belarus territory by the end of August 1941. From then on, a Belarusian resistance emerged. Hiding in woods and swamps, the partisans disrupted the Nazi war effort and the SS retaliated with a scorched earth policy.

So, what happened at Khatyn? On 22 March 1943, partisans cut a communication wire. A convoy of police attached to the SS was sent out to investigate. They walked straight into an ambush and were attacked by Soviet partisans about 4 miles from Khatyn. 4 men were killed including the commanding officer, Hans Otto Woelke. As a result, more troops were sent, SS and the notorious Dirlewanger Brigade, basically criminals, thugs, bullies, and Russian soldiers who had deserted to join the Nazis. Their function was simple - unleash hell - and they chose quiet, little Khatyn. They drove the inhabitants from their houses and into a barn, which was then covered with straw and set on fire. The trapped people managed to break down the barn doors, but in trying to escape, were killed by machine gun fire. 147 people, including 75 children under 16 years of age, were killed – burned, shot or suffocated in fire. The village was then looted and burned to the ground. Sadly, Khatyn's story was not unique: Belarus lost a quarter of its pre-war population in what they refer to as the Great Patriotic War.

At Khatyn, the villagers were buried by people from neighbouring villages on the third day after the tragedy, their grave marked by three crosses. These were replaced in 1964 by a statue called the Grieving Mother. In 1965, Pyotr Mironovich Masherov first secretary of the Communist party in Belarus (an honest politician) wanted a national memorial. He was from the far north where there were just as many atrocities, but he was also realistic. The memorial needed to be near Minsk so Khatyn was selected. A competition was held, and the winners were a team of young architects – unusual in the Soviet Union then. On the July 5th, 1969, Khatyn Memorial Complex opened, 25 years after the liberation of Minsk. When you arrive at Khatyn there is a symbolic wicker fence, marking the start of the village, the place where villagers welcomed guests, performed weddings and held some religious ceremonies. Writing on the fence recalls 209 towns destroyed, 9200 villages burnt down and 2,230,000 people of Belarus killed. These were the known figures when the complex opened in 1969. Research since has added to the number. Grey flagstones (the colour of ash) lead to the complex with red geraniums down the centre – a stream of blood.



The only statue at Khatyn looks out over the former village. It is 6m high, and is called the **Unconquered or Unsubdued Man**. It is based on the story of Yosif Kaminsky, the village blacksmith and only adult survivor from the barn. Yosif and his son Adam forced their way out of the barn when the roof collapsed, only to be met by machine gunfire. Yosif was shot but recovered consciousness after the troops left. He found his son Adam, aged 15, still alive but very badly injured. Adam died a few minutes later in his father's arms. The statue represents Yosif, burnt with clothes in rags, carrying his dead son. It also represents every parent that lost children.

To the right of statue, on the site of the barn, is a black stone slab - the symbolic roof of a barn. It is broken - the barn roof was weakened and collapsed burning people inside. The white pathway leading to the barn narrows as it approaches and is called the 'Final Pathway'. To the left of the statue is the 'Wreath of Memory' - mass burial site of the villagers. The monument above it represents foundation joists of a new house. Inscriptions read, on one side, from the dead to the living:

"Good People remember. We loved life, and our homeland, and you. We plead to you: let our cries and grief turn into courage and strength, so that you can establish Peace and Rest on this Earth. So that nowhere and never life will disappear again in a tornado of fire!"

On the reverse side of the Wreath of Memory, the reply from the living to the dead:

"You are our relatives. Our heads are bowed in great sorrow, we stand before you. You accepted death, but the flame of love for our homeland shall never be quenched. The memory of you in





people is immortal, eternal as our Earth and ever bright Sun above."



Tree of Life. 433 Belarusian villages were completely burned down and residents killed, but the villages were later rebuilt. Their names are on metal 'trees of life' in front of concrete blocks representing a house being rebuilt.



Moving on, the site of every house in the village is marked in same way. 26 dwellings all in their original positions, each with its own memorial. A concrete open gate, a path leading to concrete beams symbolising the joists of the house, with the ground inside the beams blackened, burnt. After the massacre, the only evidence of the village were brick chimneys, so every house is marked by a stylised chimney stack – broken at bottom to symbolise ruined lives of the inhabitants. At the top of each chimney is a bell. Every 30 seconds as you walk around the village, a bell rings – someone in Belarus died every 30 seconds during Great Patriotic War. Memorial plaques on each chimney show the victims from that house with their ages if they were children.

Wall of Sorrow. This part of the memorial is dedicated to all the people killed in Belarus, and remembering especially over 260 extermination sites, forced labour camps and the 810,000 soviet prisoners of war whole also died on Belarusian soil. The entrance to the Wall of Sorrow symbolises broken prison bars with the wall overhanging, resembling walls of barracks in concentration camps. Along the wall are 66 recesses with the names of sites of most loss of life. Large recesses represent sites with more than 20,000 victims. The first two recesses are to remember children, and people leave offerings of toys or sweets. One is to an orphanage that the Nazis wanted as an army HQ, so they killed all the children. The second is to the village of Krasny Bereg. All children aged between 4 and 15 were rounded up and drained of their blood for transfusion to wounded Germans in hospitals. The Eternal flame A large black marble slab with poplar trees in 3 corners symbolises life. Instead of a tree, in the 4th corner is the eternal flame to remember that 1 in 4 of population was killed between 1941 and 1944.



Cemetery of Villages. 186 villages were totally destroyed along with all their inhabitants and never rebuilt. The Cemetery of Villages has 185 graves with the name of each village that disappeared. Each grave has black scorched earth with a red pedestal - symbolic flames, and on top, a black urn. Representatives came from all over Belarus bringing a handful of soil from each of the 185 burned villages to create the symbolic graveyard. Khatyn itself is the 186th village, site of the symbolic graveyard.

Before Khatyn, memorials depicted glory - October Square, Victory Park, the Mound of Glory, Brest Hero Fortess, even the name – Great Patriotic War. The Minister of Culture for USSR was horrified by Khatyn. She thought it should be demolished and saw it as a mockery that an old man in rags was shown rescuing a child. It should be a glorious soldier. On April 1, 1970, a secret ballot of the USSR central committee voted 36 to 2 in favour of Khatyn. Since then, memorials have



changed in Belarus. The site of the ghetto in Minsk is marked by a harrowing statue of Jewish people being led to their death. The Island of Tears shows mothers grieving for their soldier sons who died in Afghanistan. According to some sceptics, Khatyn and the massacre were deliberately exploited by the Soviet authorities to deflect from the Katyn massacre, for which the Russian occupying force in Poland was responsible. There are claims that a major reason for erecting the memorial was to cause confusion with Katyn among foreign visitors. Whatever the motive, in a clearing deep in the misty birch forest, the Wall of Sorrow and Cemetery of Villages will serve as a permanent reminder of a country whose civilian population suffered and lost so much.

Eight inhabitants of the village survived. Six of them witnessed the massacre – five children and an adult. Two were still alive in 2018 at the 75th anniversary. Anton Iosifovich Baranovsky (1930–1969) was left for dead with wounds in both legs. His injuries were treated by partisans. Five months after the opening of the Memorial, he died. Viktor Andreevich Zhelobkovich, (born 1936), survived the fire. His mother Anna ran out of the barn with her clothes on fire, holding his hand. They were both shot, but she fell covering her son with her body. He lay under his mother's corpse till the soldiers left the village. As an adult, he worked at the design office of precise engineering, in Minsk. He was still alive in 2018. Alexander Petrovich Zhelobkovich (1930–1994), escaped from the village before the soldiers were able to fully surround it.



His mother woke him up and put him on a horse, on which he escaped to a nearby village. Volodya Antonovich Yaskevich (1930–2008) was staying with his aunt. He ran and hid in a potato pit. Two soldiers noticed the boy but spared him. Vladimir noted that they spoke German between themselves, not Ukrainian. Volodya 's sister, Sofia Antonovna Yaskevich (born 1934), also staying with their aunt, was pushed into the cellar by her aunt. Troops shot her aunt but didn't find Sofia. She crawled out of the house as it burned, but the soldiers failed to see her in the chaos and dense black smoke. She found her brother and

they escaped together. Two women from neighbouring villages were visiting Khatyn and were killed in the barn and two girls from Khatyn were visiting other villages on the day of the massacre. Two girls, Maria Fedorovich and Yulia Klimovich managed to leave the barn and crawl to the nearby wood. Badly burnt, they were found by the inhabitants of a nearby village. Unfortunately, that village was later also burned to the ground and the two girls perished. The only adult survivor of the massacre was blacksmith Yuzif Kaminsky. He died in 1973. For many years, Yuzif went back to the site of the village every week. As it became more visited, he educated school parties, visitors and young people in the story of Khatyn.



LAST WRITES

GLORIA BRYANT EDITS THIS MAGAZINE AND IS A READER WITH PTO AT ST FRANCIS NEWCASTLE.

History and literature are two of my interests and both have kept me company during the now long months of the pandemic.

History tells us that there have been three known great pandemics: the plague of Justinian (6th century A.D.); the Black Death (1347-1351); and the influenza which began to spread across the world in the autumn of 1918, wrongly labelled the Spanish Flu. There have been other serious outbreaks of disease but they have been on a smaller scale, for example, the Great Plague in London of 1665, the Sweating Sickness, which appeared periodically for centuries, and the 1957 Asian Flu (which I had as a child). More recently, we have had Avian Flu and viruses causing severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), which includes Covid-19, now the cause of the world's fourth great pandemic. Though pestilence has been written about since at least biblical times, the cause of the first three pandemics is a matter of scientific as well as historical record. The sixth century pandemic and the Black Death were both caused by infection with the yersinia pestis bacterium, a conclusion based on historical descriptions of the illness in affected people and the discovery of the bacterium's DNA in human remains at ancient grave sites.

Spanish Flu, however, was caused by a virus, H1N1 influenza A. Plague was spread by flea-infested rats: the flea was the vector and the rats the reservoir hosts. When plague was endemic hygiene and sanitation were such that most people lived in close proximity to rats and were familiar with infestations of fleas and lice. Spanish Flu, however, was an airborne virus carried from human to human by droplets and contact, much like Covid-19. There are said to have been 15-100 million deaths during the plague of Justinian and 75-200 million during the Black Death, but there is no way of verifying the numbers and so until now the 1918 pandemic is judged to have caused the greatest number of deaths: 22 million, almost twice the number who died during the First World War.

History can offer us a wealth of facts about pandemics, as well as insights into how governments and ordinary people reacted to the threat they faced. For instance, in every pandemic, those in power have attempted to discover the source of the disease: on every occasion, including the present one, judging it to originate in Asia. Even in the 6th century rats on ships coming from the east were identified as the cause of the plague. In 1918, the arrival of the flu in Europe has been blamed on the arrival in France of some Chinese labour battalions or on Russian troops arriving from Vladivostok. In every pandemic, governments have also imposed quarantining on those who fall ill. In the past the measures taken were brutal: affected families were shut inside their boarded-up properties and there they stayed until they recovered or died. Even as late as the last pandemic in 1918, in the poorer areas of many cities people died alone and the living were found sharing rooms with corpses. In all previous pandemics, mass graves took the place of the individual burial plot, and in this pandemic, mass grave sites have appeared once again in various parts of the world. Of course, those who can tend to leave the overcrowded cities and towns and take refuge in rural communities: the aristocracy and gentry of the past retreated to their country estates, willing, just like the second home owners of the present, to risk transporting a lethal disease to those who might otherwise have been spared.

However, except where we have eyewitness testimony, history probably cannot do quite as much as literature to give us insights into how those of past and present experience a pandemic. It is all too easy to forget that behind the facts and the statistics are real people and the death of each one means a life has been cut short and a family left bereft. Currently, the media have done their best to overcome the tendency to forget this, but as a society we have become data-obsessed. Literature, however, is able to explore more freely the feelings, fears and hopes which beset us when faced with something we seem to have no control over and which brings death on an unimaginable scale. Pandemics have given rise to a small library of novels, some of which are regarded as masterpieces, among them these three which I have enjoyed in the past: 'A Journal of the Plague Year' by Daniel Defoe, 'Year of Wonders' by Geraldine Brooks and 'La Peste' (The Plague) by Albert Camus. Daniel Defoe's work is so evocative that it was once thought to be an eyewitness account of plague in London in 1665. 'Year of Wonders' describes a catastrophic outbreak of plague in an isolated English village which arrives

in an infected bolt of cloth from London. Set in the 1660s and told through the eyes of a housemaid, the novel was inspired by the true story of Eyam in Derbyshire. 'La Peste', which was one of my A Level French set books decades ago, tells of an outbreak of plague in the French Algerian city of Oran. Written in 1947, the main characters include two doctors, a priest and a journalist but there are also many ordinary people in the story, affected by their experience of a devastating illness for which there are few treatments. In these books what becomes apparent is that in a catastrophe we can never predict how people will behave: will they be their best self or their worst self? In the books we find selfishness and fear, inertia and wrong-doing, indifference and despair, just as we have witnessed panic-buying and inequality, unnecessary journeys to tourist spots, raves and house parties, scams and criminality. However, the books also tell of heroism and the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and we have heard of that too since March 2020. In Brooks' book, a year of catastrophe becomes a year of wonders. Dare we hope that this period of lockdowns and restrictions will become a time of wonders for us? The vaccines certainly give us some cause to.

"So human culpability for this pandemic and the resulting loss of life is not something which can be ignored."

More recently, I have read two novels, 'Hamnet' by Maggie O'Farrell and 'Daughters of Mars' by Thomas Kenneally. 'Hamnet' is an account of William Shakespeare's only son who died of plague, aged twelve, in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1596, though his frailer twin sister, Judith, from whom he caught the disease, survived. The novel is not really about Hamnet: the main character is his mother Anne or Agnes Hathaway. Even Hamnet's father is never mentioned by name. What lies at the heart of the novel is a mother's grief. The description of Agnes washing and laying out the body of her dead son and her anguish that the task must be carried out quickly to protect the community is deeply moving. Thankfully,

very few children have died of Covid-19 but as I write more than 100,000 people have died in Britain who potentially had many years of living and loving ahead of them. O'Farrell's narrative powerfully evokes the deep sense of loss we feel on the death of a loved one, perhaps especially when we believe that death need not have happened when it did. The question that dogs Agnes in Hamnet is why did her daughter live and her son die. In Kenneally's book, which is about two Australian sisters, both nurses caring for the wounded on the Western Front in 1918, the randomness of the outcomes from contagion and infection is also explored. As the war draws to an end, both women catch Spanish Flu and Kenneally offers alternative endings to the novel: the older sister dies, the younger lives and vice versa. The life of the surviving sister, the might-have-been, is explored in both endings. There are many people across the world who are currently doing just that in the aftermath of the death of someone they loved.

I have found great solace in literature these recent months. Whether or not that is so for you, as Christians we are likely to be asking, and as ministers being asked, where God has been this last year. Theologians are uniquely equipped to provide answers to that question. One of the main characters in 'La Peste' is a Jesuit priest, a learned and much respected man. Soon after the outbreak of the plague, he preaches a sermon in the cathedral at Oran in which he tells his congregation that the plague is God's punishment for their sins. He also confides in one of the doctors that while there is no rational explanation for the death of a boy of eleven, it must be accepted because to question the death is to question God's will. Thankfully, it would be rare nowadays to hear a Christian, let alone a priest, speak of a pandemic or a child's death as the will of God. God is Love. Nevertheless, God's judgement permeates our Scriptures, though judgement is not about 'zapping' us but rather about bringing us back to a way of living imbued with justice and love. So human culpability for this pandemic and the resulting loss of life is not something which can be ignored. If any good can come out of Covid-19, it would be my hope that it transforms humankind into people who care for the needs of the poor, who strive to end the countless injustices endured by so many, who resolve to end the cruelty and disrespect shown to the animal kingdom and who remember our call to be stewards of God's whole creation. All these aspirations are connected and humankind cannot hear them articulated too often by the faith leaders of the world.