

109 *Where are we going?*

A big thank-you to those of you who have kept with me on my journey; some of you have encouraged me to continue, some have argued with me, some have prayed for me, some have prayed *with* me – all very much appreciated, believe me!

Time to take stock. It all started in spring 2017, when I found a way of seeing God (as a Trinity) that won my heart. I read a book that resonated with my desire for relationship, and at the exact same time, we moved to the local C of E church, where we *found* relationship. This church embodies welcome; this church *is* welcome. Every new person who joins the church says the same thing: “When I first came to this church I was at a difficult point in my life, and I was made to feel so welcome...”

Don’t get me wrong, I haven’t found the perfect church, but I have found *something*.

In mid 2018, having done lots of reading, I tried to articulate why I was now so happy, and why I was so **unhappy** with the way I had lived my Christian life for 50 years. I’m an engineer, so I want to know how things work! And, of course, I wanted to share the happiness I’d found.

Well, after 18 months and 109 articles, have I got ‘the answer’? And, if so, why am I still writing? I’ve read a lot of books and, latterly, read rather a lot more of my Bible – it’s a privilege to have time, energy and inspiration to keep going, keep learning, keep seeing things differently.

But have I come to any actual conclusions? any important ideas? any crucial emphases?

For me, the absolute essential is who we *are*. “By this will everyone know you are my disciples” We have to be real, honest and genuine. So we have to pray regularly for the fruit of the Spirit. (God has recently stressed *patience*...with people and with situations, and with myself.)

All very wishy-washy, yes, I know, so what about the *content* of what we believe – and what about how we communicate this good news in the 21st century? This is vitally important, if there is going to still be a church in the UK after we oldies have died!

So I guess that’s what I’ve been trying to do here, trying to put into words ‘the gospel’, so that when people say, “You’re a lovely lot here, so welcoming, but why?!” we’ll know what to say.

And yes, the church – we – have got our work cut out because of some of the awful things that I mentioned last time [108] that ‘the church’ has done in the name of God, over the centuries.

So what is coming through to me in all this studying and thinking? For now, just a few strands that I/we could perhaps follow.

– The gospel is all about Jesus – a real person – would it help to concentrate more on the man?

– In a ‘self-focused generation’ some people (e.g. my Tim, in his professional life) are stressing ‘community’. But the early church was all about community – can we regain that? For too long, ‘the gospel’ has been all about personal salvation – me and my salvation – and you can join the church once you’re saved.

– In a ‘we can explain everything’ generation, we have turned ‘the gospel’ into a mechanism by which we are saved. But *how* we are saved (made whole again) is a mystery; God is a mystery. The Bible has many strands to help us appreciate salvation – maybe we need a broader view.

– I’ve just noticed that even John the Baptist “preached the good news of the kingdom”, but that was before Jesus started preaching, let alone before his death and resurrection. Discuss!

– Are we too precious – to the detriment of the gospel – about the Bible? It’s an essential pointer, yes, but it’s not an infallible instruction manual. (I was amused to notice the other day that Mark, in his Gospel, says “It is written in Isaiah the prophet...” and then quotes Malachi 3:1!)

– One strand I want to follow is that, of all the OT quotes in the NT, the majority are from Isaiah, mainly from chapters 40–55. Why was the suffering servant so important to the early church?

I’m currently reading Tom Holland’s *Contours of Pauline theology*, and realising how different Paul’s writings look when seen through the eyes of his first hearers, in terms of community, covenant, the fulfilment of all that God had been saying, i.e. “according to the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15). To try to make Paul’s ideas fit into our ‘personal salvation model’ is a very square peg! But let’s see what the suffering servant has to say.

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